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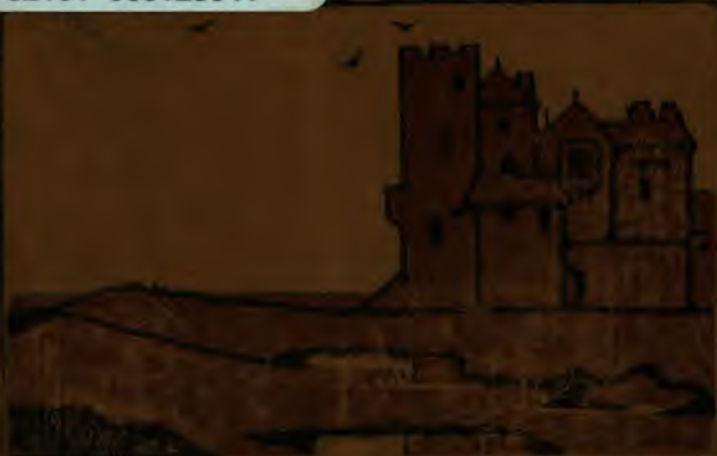
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And there underneath glittered a pool of liquid gold.

THE GOLD WORSHIPERS

BY
J. B. HARRIS-BURLAND
*Author of "The Black Motor Car,"
"The Financier," etc.*



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CHARLES GRUNWALD

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To my friend
ERIC CLEMENT SCOTT

(RECAP)

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The Gold Worshipers

CHAPTER I

SIR GILBERT DREW, OF TRUNIONS

FOUR years ago I came down for the summer vacation after my first year at Oxford. 'Varsity life is a strenuous thing for young men of means and family, and I, Harry Drew, sole heir to Sir Gilbert Drew, baronet and millionaire, lived it up to the hilt, as only a boy can live who has just left the strict confinement and discipline of a public school. I spread my wings and flew high. I bet heavily and played cards for high stakes, and, though I lost but little, I gained that contempt for money which is speedily engendered in the gambler's mind. I entertained largely, and my wine bill was princely. I kept six horses, two grooms, and owned an attenuated animal that I was assured had every chance of winning a big race some day. My allowance was handsome, but I kept well outside it, and I had a most fashionable pile of bills in a drawer that was never opened except to receive another contribution.

I returned home that summer without a care at my heart. I had been ploughed for Responsions, and the

drawer of bills was so full that I could scarcely close it, but for all that the drawer was locked, the sun was bright in the sky, and Billy the Fifteenth in a recent trial had given seven pound and a year (so the trainer said) to some horse of stupendous speed and pedigree and had beaten him in a canter.

Yet I remember on that summer evening, as I neared our home after a nine-mile drive from the nearest railway station, that the barren desolation of the marshland chilled my young blood, and set me wondering why my forefathers had chosen this spot, out of all the places of the earth, in which to build their home. After the gray spires and green foliage of Oxford it seemed a veritable desert.

The road wound across a broad stretch of marshland that reached to the shores of the North Sea. The country, intersected by innumerable creeks and dykes, seemed to be a mere conglomeration of tiny islands, bare of tree or house, monotonous to the last degree. On the very edge of the shore, and with its walls washed by the high tides, stood Trunions, where I was born, and where I fervently hoped I should not be compelled to die.

The house had originally been built some two miles from the sea, but the encroaching waters had removed the lowland inch by inch, and threatened in time to wash out the very foundations.

It was of the type termed picturesque, or, in other words, a building designed for the gratification of all except those that lived in it. Outside the ivy clung to gray walls, and the background of sea converted the building into a

semi-feudal castle keeping watch o'er the deep. Within it was damp and cold, even in the warmest weather. The stone passages glistened with moisture, and even the thick and costly carpets seemed chilly to the feet. It was a strange place of residence for a man whose wealth gave him the power to live anywhere in the world, and to raise up a magnificent palace in the fairest quarter of the globe.

Yet my uncle seemed to be perfectly contented with his gloomy home, and the desolation of its surroundings appeared to harmonize with his mind, for Sir Gilbert Drew was a stern and silent man who held himself aloof from society and from all the pleasures of life. His vast wealth apparently brought him no happiness. He cared nothing for art, or for any of those hobbies on which rich men lavish their millions. His tastes were simple. He neither bet nor gambled, his personal expenses as a bachelor were small, the house was not overstocked with servants, and, save in one respect, there was none of that ostentation which seems almost a necessity to the millionaire.

Yet in this one respect my uncle outshone the rajahs of the East in costly magnificence. The exterior of Trunions was gray and almost shabby in appearance, but the interior was a scene of crude and barbaric splendor. Gold was lavished everywhere with an unsparing hand, not apparently with any idea of its decorative value, but as though it had been the cheapest and handiest substance for the purpose. Not only were all the plates, spoons, forks, and candlesticks made of the precious

metal, but the very door-handles, locks, and lamps were constructed of it—cabinets were incrustated with it, ornaments and statuettes were rudely chiseled out of it, and strewn in every direction. The place was a veritable gold mine and the talk of the whole county. Very few people had ever visited Trunions during my uncle's tenancy, but those, who had been inside it, characterized this lavish use of gold as a vulgar display of wealth. I, who knew better, regarded it as the harmless mania of a man who had no other use for his money.

So much for Trunions, which now stood up gaunt and ugly against the eastern sky as I whirled over the long, straight road across the lonely marshland. It struck me as the very embodiment of dull and dreary solemnity, and I mentally resolved to leave it as soon as I could find a decent excuse for doing so. At last I rattled smartly across the gray stone bridge over the creek which practically converted the house into an island, dashed under an archway into a square courtyard, and, flinging the reins to the groom, jumped to the ground and burst open the hall door.

Simson, the butler, confronted me, the very image of icy respectability.

"Hello, Simson," I cried heartily, "how are you—why, what the deuce"—and I looked round the hall in amazement. It was almost as bare as a prison cell. I remembered it as a treasure house of costly ornaments, and a huge gold shield, embossed with the multitudinous quarterings of the Drew family and their alliances was one of its most conspicuous features. Nothing remained but gray

stone walls, an oak table, a carpet, and some richly carved chairs. Every ounce of the precious metal had vanished, and I noticed that the massive gold card salver had been replaced by a plain oak tray.

"What's happened, Simson?" I repeated. The face of the well-trained servant was as impassive as a mask of stone.

"Sir Gilbert awaits you in the library, sir," he replied, for all the world like a servant in a melodrama.

"Library, eh?" I said with a smile. "Good, Simson, very good. Ha, ha!"

My mirth was excusable. I wondered how many books were required to form a library. As far as I remembered, there were only a dozen in the lofty vaulted-smoking-room.

I groped my way in darkness to the apartment—Trunions was always in darkness, even in the middle of June—and found my uncle seated at a desk covered with papers. I noted with some surprise that the whole of one wall was lined with books. Simson was justified.

My uncle rose to greet me, and, holding me by the hand, looked narrowly in my face. I don't think he found there exactly what he wanted, for he frowned and gave me a curt enough welcome.

I am not ashamed to confess that I was always afraid of Sir Gilbert Drew. His handsome, clean-shaven face, deeply lined as though by some great sorrow or illness, his dark, inscrutable eyes still alight with the fires of youth, his grim, hard mouth, his firm, square jaw, all impressed me with a sense of hidden power. He was

always kindness itself to me, but for all that I feared him.

He motioned me to a chair and offered me a cigar, not quite so excellent as those I smoked at his expense at Oxford.

"Passed Smalls, I suppose?" he asked abruptly after a short pause. I was silent and almost blushed.

"Not passed, eh?" he continued. "A pity—a mortal pity. I'd like you to have passed one exam. before you came down."

"Plenty of time, uncle," I replied cheerily. "You know Lord Balton, a cabinet minister now, did not——"

"Damn Lord Balton!" he exclaimed. "I am talking about you, Harry. You don't go back to Oxford."

"Don't go back?" I repeated in amazement. "Why, whatever——"

"No, you've got to work," he exclaimed sharply, "unless you prefer to starve. I won't mince matters. I'm broke. You may notice I've sold everything of value in the house. I'll have a few hundred a year perhaps. But you'll have to earn your living till I die."

"What has happened?" I gasped faintly.

"Don't worry about that," he said curtly. "The question is, what is going to happen? I see you are upset. You looked forward to being a millionaire. You may take my word for it, that you have not lost much. Things are better as they are, both for you and me. Now then, what can you do?"

I ran through my accomplishments in my mind, but

failed to discover one of any marketable value. I was silent, and my cigar went out.

"Church? Bar? office desk? shop?" my uncle continued coldly, "which do you prefer?" I was still silent.

"Can't afford Army," he said. "By the bye, I suppose you owe money. How much?"

I told him the approximate amount. He set his lips very tight.

"It shall be paid," he said. "It'll mean fifty pounds less a year, but I don't blame you. You've had one good year of life."

"I'm in the dark, uncle," I faltered. "Won't you tell me what has happened?"

"Remain in the dark," he replied roughly; "it will be best for you. But you've got to earn money somehow. Think it over. We'll drop the matter now. What do you think of my library? Just cross the room and have a look at it."

I walked over to the bookcase and noted with some surprise that it was filled with religious works. I was confronted with row after row of sermons, treatises, commentaries, and scientific defenses of the Christian Faith. I knew that my uncle had a supreme contempt for religion, and wondered why he had accumulated the formidable array of books before me. I turned to him with questioning eyes.

"The Christian Religion," he said solemnly, "is the finest faith in the world. I never realized it till a month ago. It has been a great comfort to me."

I said nothing, but the lines commencing "The devil

was sick " occurred to me. It was clear that my uncle's misfortunes had driven him to seek comfort in religious faith.

Before we went to bed that night we had family prayers, and I retired to my room in an absolute state of bewilderment, for my uncle had thrown his whole soul into an extempore prayer of such length and fervor that it would not have disgraced a religious fanatic in the time of Cromwell. I was fully convinced that his brain had been affected.

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE CRAFT

I WOKE early the next morning and finished my breakfast before my uncle came down-stairs. Then I went round to the stables, called two favorite fox terriers from the loose box in which they lived, and set off for a walk across the marshes, while the air was yet cool and the sun comparatively harmless in the blue sky overhead.

I had much to think over, and wished to come to some definite conclusion before I had another interview with Sir Gilbert. The choice of a profession is a difficult task for a young man who has no aptitude for work, and who has been brought up as the heir to an enormous fortune.

And, apart from my own personal dilemma, there was much in the whole business that called for serious consideration. There was an element of mystery in my uncle's misfortune, for I knew him too well to suppose that he had embarked in any rash speculation, and he was averse to commercial enterprise of any kind whatever. His sudden mania for religion was also a cause for anxiety. It was possible that his mind was unhinged, and that therein lay a solution to the whole business. He had given away his fortune, cast it into the sea, perhaps, and had thrown his heart and soul into the pursuit of the treasure that lies where neither moth nor rust corrupt and where thieves do not break through and steal. Men

had done as much before and been commended for the act. But the thought was a disquieting one to a young man of pleasure.

I strode northwards along the high bank which kept out the sea from the vast tract of marshland, and after half an hour's brisk walking reached the little village of Standinghoe. At this point of the coast a broad estuary sweeps inland for ten miles and narrows down into a river navigable for barges nearly twenty-five miles from the sea. At high tide the whole estuary forms a magnificent sheet of water five miles across at the mouth, but at low tide sand-banks run out for a mile and a half on either side, and further up the creek the channel is tortuous and full of snares for the inexperienced mariner. And even far out at sea the ebbing tide leaves great tracts of hard sand, long cruel islands that lie in wait for ships under the foaming surface of the water. To-day the whole region is dotted with buoys and light-ships, but a few years ago it was a very different matter, and the men of Standinghoe earned a comfortable living by what they found on the sands and what they saved from the sea.

Standinghoe itself is situated at the southern corner of the estuary, a mere clump of cottages built for the most part of tarred timber. At low tides a narrow channel called the Gut runs across the sand to it, and vessels drawing five feet of water can reach it at all states of the tide. Nominally all the inhabitants are fishermen, but there are ugly stories of false lights in the channel, and unlawful cargoes discharged up the narrow gullies that run into the marshland.

I was well known in the place and liked, as all free-handed young mugs are liked, by a class of men who prey on their fellows. A little knot of loafers touched their hats to me as I passed. I had a few words of greeting for each, and then made my way to what might be described as the "big house" of the village. It was equal in size to any two of the other cottages, and stood by itself on the very edge of the creek. The heavy tarred door stood open and the slim figure of a girl appeared as my feet crunched over the pebbles. My interest was aroused, for I had never seen a woman in Billy Playle's house before, and this one was evidently young and fair to look upon. As I drew closer she disappeared, and when I knocked at the door I could see no one in the room within.

In a few minutes, however, I heard the sound of heavy footsteps at the side of the house and a man appeared round the corner. It was Billy Playle himself.

"Hello, Billy," I said heartily, "how goes it?"

I held out my hand and he grasped it in an enormous hairy fist that was gnarled and twisted like the root of a tree. He was a strange figure of a man, and of a most repulsive appearance to those who saw him for the first time. His huge frame was crushed and bent as though it had been mangled in some railway accident. He was hunchbacked, and one of his mighty shoulders was some inches higher than the other. He was bow-legged to deformity, and his great arms reached below his knees. His face was mercifully covered with a thick growth of hair, but his forehead and cheek bones were

horribly scarred, and half of his nose appeared to have been cut off. Save for the keen, fierce blue eyes, he resembled some huge gorilla more than a human being. "Crook" Playle his mates called him, but no one knew what terrible disaster had crushed what must once have been the fine figure of a man into a battered lump of deformity.

"How be you, Mr. Drew?" he said in a strong harsh voice; "how be you? You look as if a bit of air'd freshen you up, you do. Strange doings at Trunions, I hear. What's the right meaning of it?"

"My uncle's got religion bad," I replied with an attempt at a smile.

"They say he preaches wonnerful," said Playle, "and that he's sold all his goods to give to the poor."

"I'm anxious about him," I replied.

"Aye, you may well be that," said Playle, "you may well be that. A young fellow doesn't like to see his fortune chucked away, he doesn't. Going to sail this summer, Mr. Drew?"

I cast my eyes longingly on the ten-ton yacht which lay in the Gut. I was fond of sailing. Billy Playle had taught me all I knew, and he looked after my boat for me.

"If my uncle doesn't want it sold," I replied, "and if I'm not up in London on an office stool." Billy Playle laughed.

"You won't like that, Mr. Drew," he said.

"I'd rather be the humblest fisherman in this village," I replied with fervor, and I meant it.

"Ours is a hard life," he said, "but it's under God's sky."

"And you make money by it, eh, Billy?"

"Aye, there's a heap of fish in the sea."

"Big fish, too, eh?" I replied. "A thousand tons some of 'em, and as helpless as a dead sprat." Playle's face darkened.

"You'd best not talk like that in Standinghoe," he said grimly.

"We'll change the conversation," I answered. "I saw a girl at the door just now."

"Aye, my niece," he replied. "Her mother died a month ago. She's an orphan—Mary?" There was no reply, and the man thrust his great shoulders into the doorway. "Mary?" he shouted. There was the sound of an opening door and light footsteps, and then a young girl emerged timidly into the sunshine.

"Mary," said Billy Playle, "this is Mr. Drew, the owner of the *Vanda*, the boat I took you out in last week." The girl blushed and held out a slender little hand without raising her eyes to mine. I grasped it and held it a little more tightly than the occasion warranted.

"I enjoyed the sail so much," she murmured.

"I hope you'll go out whenever you like," I said eagerly. "The boat is always at your disposal." She raised her face and I saw that Billy Playle's keen blue eyes were watching us. I made some commonplace remark about Standinghoe and the weather, but all the time I was drinking in the rare beauty of the young girl who stood before me.

And indeed Mary Playle was lovely enough to turn the head of an older and less susceptible man than myself. She was about eighteen, a mere slip of a girl, tinted like the wild rose and as fresh and fragrant as any flower that ever turned its face to the sun. Her hair was of the glorious golden red that is rarely seen save in the paintings of Titian, her eyes were of a deep brown, her lips—but there, why should I attempt to describe her, when a mere description can convey nothing of her charms to a reader. Such women are not to be described in words. Only the artist can bring them before the eyes of those who have not seen them. It is sufficient to say that though I have lived some years and have traveled all over the world, I have never yet come across a more beautiful woman than Mary Playle. Moreover, her refinement and gentle breeding were in such marked contrast to the manners of her uncle, that it was hard to believe that she came of the same family.

I passed away over an hour in conversation about my yacht and more general topics which I thought might be interesting to the girl. But she was too shy to speak more than a few words in answer to a direct question, and, seizing a favorable opportunity, she retired into the house.

I left shortly afterwards and walked back to Trunions, thinking, I'm afraid, less of my future career than of the sweet face of Mary Playle.

When I reached the house I was relieved to find that my uncle had been suddenly called to London on business and would not return till the last train. I spent the after-

noon in overhauling my guns and rods, and towards the cool of the evening resolved to again walk over to Stand-inghoe. I felt the place drawing me like a magnet.

I called at Playle's house and invented an excuse for my visit.

"I'm going out on the *Vanda* to-morrow, Playle," I said. "Can you come with me, and if your niece ——" I stopped and looked questioningly at the girl's face. Playle turned to a small barometer that hung upon the wall and tapped it with one finger.

"I'm thinking it won't be pleasant sailing to-morrow," he said, "the glass has fallen a deal too quickly, it has." He moved towards the open door and scrutinized the sky for some confirmation of his prediction. I followed him, after casting an admiring glance at his niece. He pointed to the east, and I saw a long dark line on the horizon.

"It's coming up," he said, "and there's a vessel lying about three miles nor'east of the Sunken Sands. God help them if their anchors don't hold, and it's bad holding ground out there, Mr. Drew."

I took out my glasses and a small speck near the skyline resolved itself into the definite form of a vessel, long, slightly raised at each end, with two thick stumpy masts and no bowsprit.

"A curious vessel, too," I said; "something like a Dutchman." Playle held out his hand and I gave him the glasses. He looked long and earnestly at the ship, as though he recognized it. Then he returned me the glasses and I noticed with some surprise that a fiendish

expression of hate had come into his eyes, and that his whole body trembled with excitement.

"Yes, there'll be dirty weather to-night," he said, "and work for some of us poor chaps, maybe. You'd best get home at once, sir, before the rain comes. Good-night."

"Good-night, Billy," I replied, and then, thrusting my head inside the door, "Good-night, Miss Playle."

"Good-night, Mr. Drew," she said softly, and I carried the sweet vision of her out with me into the night.

Before I had gone ten yards from the house I heard the door flung to with a crash, and the grating sound of bolts shot violently into their sockets.

CHAPTER III

THE YELLOW BOX

As I walked home along the high bank, which bordered the marshes, the sun was setting, and all the creeks and pools to the west glittered like streaks and splashes of crimson fire. It was high tide and the sea rippled gently against the very bank itself. A faint breeze was already stirring the reeds and grasses, and the dark wall of clouds had risen far above the eastern horizon.

Before I had gone a mile the breeze freshened and I felt a few spots of rain. I quickened my pace and turned up the collar of my coat. Half the sky was now in darkness, and the torn edge of the bank of clouds looked lurid in the light of the setting sun.

In a few minutes the storm broke, and the rain came down in torrents. I trudged along through the mud and dripping grass and gave no further thought to sky or weather. The storm had come, and there was an end of it. I turned my mind to more important matters; to Mary Playle, to her uncle's evident agitation at the sight of the ship anchored beyond the Sunken Sands, to my own misfortunes, and to the dreary future that lay before me.

By the time I reached Trunions I was wet through to the skin and had not arrived at any solution of the problem that confronted me, except that my future occupation

would have to allow me an opportunity of seeing Mary Playle.

I had a hot bath, changed into some dry clothes, and ate a hearty meal. When my uncle returned, I was ensconced comfortably in an easy chair with a cigar between my lips. He looked tired and old, and regarded me with evident disfavor.

"Where were you this morning?" he asked abruptly; "I particularly wished to see you before I went to town."

"I walked over to Standinghoe," I replied, "to see after the *Vanda*. Of course, if I'd known you wanted to see me——"

"You might have guessed," he interrupted, "after last night. And I wouldn't worry about the *Vanda* if I were you. She's got to be sold. Did you see Playle?"

"Yes," I replied meekly.

"Well, he's a bad lot, and the less you have to do with him the better. You won't have any excuse when the *Vanda's* sold."

"Won't you have any dinner?" I asked, seeking for peace, "they're keeping some for you."

"I had some food in town, thanks," he answered curtly; "I'm wet, and must change. There's going to be a storm to-night."

"Yes," I said, only too eager to get the conversation off my own shortcomings, "and there's a fool of a ship at anchor to wind'ard of the Sunken Sands. A queer ship, too, like nothing I've ever seen in these parts."

"You may have an opportunity of inspecting her more

closely," he said grimly, " for it's certain they'll be ashore to-night. What's odd about her ? "

I described the vessel in a few words, and to my surprise my uncle cross-questioned me closely as to her length, beam, rig, spars, etc. As a rule he took no interest in nautical matters. I rallied him on his sudden thirst for knowledge. He frowned.

" Well, she'll be ashore, anyway," he said, turning abruptly on his heel, " and it will serve the fools right if they drown. In half an hour's time I should like to see you in the library. We will have prayers, and then I have something that I particularly want you to do to-night."

He closed the door behind him and I was left to my own thoughts. The rain was now drifting against the window in torrents, and the wind howled mournfully round the house. I felt depressed, and I could not get rid of the idea that some terrible disaster was coming into my life on the wings of the storm.

Half an hour later I went to the library and found my uncle seated at his desk with an open Bible before him. He told me to sit down, and then commenced to read me the parable of the rich young man. When he had finished, he closed the book with a crash and, rising to his feet, poured forth an eloquent denunciation of wealth and the evil that arose from the possession of great riches. His voice was earnest and sonorous, and he spoke with the fine gesture and finished phrase of a skilled orator. His eyes flashed, and his stern handsome face glowed with enthusiasm. It was easy to see that he was thor-

oughly impressed with the truth of his own words. He seemed like some prophet of old, and he, too, was crying in the wilderness, for he only had one listener, and that one was sufficiently worldly to turn a deaf ear to his pleadings and arguments. It is easy, I said to myself, for a man who has lost all his money to preach on the deceitfulness of riches.

When he had finished his sermon, which was brief and very much to the point, he fell on his knees, and I followed suit. And then for a full five minutes he poured out all his soul in a heartfelt prayer that we both might be delivered from the love of wealth and the pomp and vanity of the world. He ceased abruptly, and burying his face in his hands, appeared to be silently praying for my welfare. And to me there was more eloquence in the silence than in his tempestuous words. The roar of the wind and the patter of the rain suggested the tumult of his thoughts.

Then he rose to his feet and all the fervor seemed to have died out of his white, haggard face; but the fire still smouldered in his eyes.

"Harry," he said, quietly, "there is something you must do for me to-night. I have hesitated too long."

He crossed the room to a large steel safe, which stood near the fireplace, and opening two patent locks, swung the heavy door back. Then he thrust his arm among a pile of neatly docketed papers and drew out a small square object which he placed on a table close to the light. I came to his side and saw a yellow box measuring, as far as I could judge, about ten inches each way. It

was heavily clamped with some yellow metal which might have been brass or gold, and was fitted with a modern Yale lock. I bent down and examined it closely. Its whole appearance suggested great antiquity. The metal was dented and worn, but I could distinguish a faint tracery of signs or characters on the polished surface.

It seemed nothing more than an ordinary curio such as one might pick up in the bazaars of Pekin or Calcutta, but a single look at my uncle's face told me that here was something of importance, and something that had played a considerable part in his past life. His eyes glittered as he looked at it, and a wolfish expression came into his face. I could scarcely believe that he was the same man, who a few minutes ago had delivered a fierce denunciation of wealth and pleasure. He almost looked like a miser gloating over some great pile of treasure. Then I saw him place one hand on it, and his lips moved as if in prayer.

"Take it away," he cried hoarsely, "take it away from me," and he started as though it had stung him. "Burn it, break it, bury it, before it destroys my soul."

I looked at him with pity, for it was quite apparent that his mind was unhinged.

He observed the expression on my face and smiled.

"Take this box, Harry," he said, "and throw it into the sea, or thrust it down into the mud where it will lie deep, and where I can never see it again and swear to me that you will never tell me where you have placed it, or give it back to me if I ask you for it."

"I'll hide it right enough," I replied, "and I'll wager you don't find it, even if you want to. Shall I go now?"

"Yes, now," he said eagerly, "now, at once, before I repent."

I picked up the box and left the room without another word. In five minutes I had procured a lantern and put on an oilskin, a sou'wester, and a pair of rubber boots that reached to my thighs. As I opened the hall door my uncle staggered towards me with outstretched hands.

"Give it back," he cried. "I have changed my mind. Give it back, curse you."

For reply I slammed the door in his face. As I crossed the bridge I saw the yellow light streaming from the hall and heard a faint voice that was overpowered by the roar of the tempest. Then the door suddenly closed and I made my way along the bank through the driving rain, and in the teeth of a wind that almost swept me off my feet.

It was a terrible night. The sea had ebbed far from the bank, but I could hear the surge of it on the mud flats, and I knew that the ten feet of water on the Sunken Sands would be seething like a cauldron set on the furnace. My thoughts went out to the strange vessel anchored on a lee shore, and I wondered how long she would last if she dragged her anchors and drifted on to those iron sands.

I walked half a mile along the bank and then scrambled down to the shore. I sank ankle deep in ooze and driftwood, and, holding out the lantern, walked along till I



“Give it back,” he cried, “I have changed my mind.”

found the place I was looking for—a long “hard” of rough stones that ran out nearly a hundred yards into the mud. I walked along this cautiously for the stones were covered with seaweed and were slippery, and on either side of me lay a broad expanse of soft mud.

At the end of the causeway stood a tall “beacon,” or thin switch of wood. I placed the lantern on the stones and carefully jammed the yellow box between two sharp pieces of rock. Then I grasped the beacon with both hands and pulled it out. It was at least twelve feet long. Then I leaned over and plunged it into the soft mud inch by inch, and foot by foot, till half of it had disappeared.

“I think that is deep enough,” I said to myself, “and the mud grips harder than the sea.”

I laid aside the switch, and, picking up the box, examined it in the light of the lantern. It seemed a trivial thing to make so much fuss about—a mere piece of wood and metal of no intrinsic value, yet, after what I had heard and seen, I could not doubt that it had played, and was still playing, an important part in my uncle's life. It was heavy for its size but that might have been due to the metal clamping and, for ought I knew to the contrary, it might have been empty.

I placed it to my ear and shook it, but there was no sound of anything moving inside. However, I resolved to hide it where I could find it again.

I took out my knife and scratching two rough crosses on stones about a yard apart, drew an imaginary line through these two points to a spot exactly a yard from one of them. Then I leaned over and placing the box on

the surface of the mud pushed it gently down with the switch into the soft ooze. It disappeared and a few brown bubbles alone marked its grave. I knew that it would sink deep before the tide came up and covered its resting place.

I retraced my steps along the causeway, but before I had gone a hundred yards I heard the distant boom of a gun. I turned round, and far away to the northeast I saw a red light which flared up into a sheet of crimson fire and then died away again in the darkness. A moment later a rocket soared up into the sky, and then there was another boom of a gun. I knew at once what had happened.

I stood for a few moments irresolute, and then the love of adventure proved too strong for me. I resolved to go to Standinghoe on the chance of being able to get out to the wreck. I knew there would be vultures abroad that night, and perhaps one of them would venture far afield in the hope of securing a larger share of the spoil. In those days I had little thought of the feeling of others, and the possibility of my uncle being anxious about my absence did not trouble me. I was properly clad for a dirty night at sea, and the idea that I might possibly shine as a hero in the eyes of Mary Playle seemed in itself a good reason for embarking on a somewhat wild escapade.

I hurried towards Standinghoe as fast as I could walk, and every now and then I broke into a sharp trot. I was bathed in perspiration from head to foot, and all the time the guns kept booming on the Sunken Sands, and the red fire flared up against the dark sky.

Then suddenly I heard another sound close to me—a yell of fear and a screech of pain. A moment afterwards the form of a man running came into the light from my lantern. He was without a hat and had no overcoat. As he tore past me I saw that it was my uncle. A look of fear was on his face, and he ran as though the devil were behind him.

I called out to him that I was going to Standinghoe, but he took no notice of me and disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER IV

THE WRECK

I WAS considerably disturbed by this sudden and strange appearance of my uncle, but I comforted myself with the reflection that he was running in the direction of Trunions and that probably he would soon be safe home in bed.

I reached Standinghoe for the third time that day at 11:15 P.M., and found the entire male population on the beach. A great lantern, hung from a pole, flared over the scene, and illuminated the hard rough faces of the crowd. The rain beat down upon them and trickled in little streams from their oilskins and sou'westers. Many of them had glasses and every man's eyes were fixed on the nor'east, where occasionally a red light flared up into the sky. A wreck on the Sunken Sands was a sure harvest for the Standinghoe folk, for the currents took everything to the south side of the estuary. Few of them concerned themselves with the saving of lives, but a valuable cargo was worth every risk that a man can undertake.

I looked round at the weather-beaten faces and endorsed the general opinion that the men of Standinghoe were a rough lot. Men every one of them, stalwart and fearless, but with hard, cruel faces and a look in their eyes that boded ill for any one whose misfortunes might bring grist to the mill. The scraps of conversation that came to my ear betrayed no pity for the poor wretches on the Sunken

Sands. The talk was all of plunder and salvage, and whether it were better to stay on shore and wait, or go out to sea and be first in the field. I found Billy Playle standing apart from the others, and almost beyond the light from the lamp.

"Well, Billy," I said, "I s'pose she's done for?"

"She's done for, right enough, she is," he replied.

"Going out to her?" I queried.

"If I can get a couple of hands, I'll go out."

"I'll make one," I exclaimed.

He looked at me thoughtfully.

"You'd do," he said not ungraciously. "But it's a dirty night."

"Who's the other?" I asked, ignoring his remark.

"Jack 'd come, mebbe."

"Who's Jack?" I queried.

"Young Jack Outen. He's sweet on Mary, and he'd be bound to come if I asked him. He's in there now. He'd have to show up brave if I asked him. Come with me, Mr. Drew." I repressed an oath, for the company of Mr. Jack Outen did not appeal to me. But Playle took me by the arm and I went with him into the house. There we found Mary Playle and a tall, bronzed, young fellow of about twenty-five. He had an honest, manly face, and I could see at a glance that he was not a fisherman of Standinghoe.

He agreed to come with us, and in half an hour's time we were all three on board the *Dorothy*, a twenty-ton smack which belonged to Playle, and which was stout enough and stiff enough to stand any weather short of a

cyclone. She only drew five feet of water, and the Sunken Sands were open sea to her.

We put up a storm jib, reefed the mainsail down three, and commenced to beat out of the Gut into the broader waters of the estuary. It was hard work in that narrow channel, though it did not run absolutely into the teeth of the wind. We put about on the average every minute, and my hands were raw and bleeding from continually pulling on the jib sheets.

It took us two hours to reach the western edge of the sands, and they were the wettest two hours I ever spent in my life. The water beat down on us in torrents from the sky above and came up at us in sheets and cataracts of foam from the sea below. Sky and sea were blended together in a blinding mist of spray. A small hurricane lamp was lashed to the mast, but we could see nothing save the sea, the light from our port and starboard lamps, and occasionally a dull red glare ahead of us. Billy Playle was at the tiller, and he said not a word, save to give us orders and to once remark that it was blowing a bit. Neither he nor Jack Outen showed the smallest concern. Rough weather was part and parcel of their ordinary lives. For myself I enjoyed the excitement, but I could not help thinking that it would be bad for us if we struck piece of wreckage.

The water grew worse as we left the deep channel for the shallows on the sands. The broken seas were simply a seething cauldron of foam which sluiced along our decks in a white lather. At times I stood nearly knee deep in it, and once Playle in the cockpit was up to his waist in water.

"Put up a bigger light, Jack," growled Playle.

The young sailor vanished through a hatchway and presently emerged with a brilliant riding lamp which he lashed to one of the stays. It threw a larger circle of light round the boat, but still showed us nothing but white foam.

Then suddenly, not more than a hundred yards ahead of us, the whole sky burst into a crimson flare, and we saw the doomed ship like some helpless black animal drowning in a surge of waters. Her decks were thronged with human beings, dancing and gesticulating like little black devils against a background of red fire. We could see that her masts were gone and that her back was broken. Every now and then she was lifted up and dropped down again on the hard sand, and I fancied that I could feel the shock of quivering timbers. Then I saw an enormous sea lift her into the air and she seemed to dissolve and melt away in the foam. The light vanished and we could hear the shrieks of drowning men.

"Drop the anchor," yelled Playle, as he brought the boat's head into the wind. The chain rattled out fathom after fathom as the wind drove us back from the anchor. The sails cracked like pistol shots, but we soon had them down and lashed, so that we could set them again at a moment's notice. Playle left the tiller and arranged three large rope fenders on each side of the boat.

"There'll be some nasty stuff knocking about in a minute or two," he said. "Now keep your damned eyes open for what we can pick up."

"Dead bodies, I suppose," I said harshly, "unless you wish to save any one alive."

"Aye, we'll save them," he replied, "if they come our way. They'll all come past, Mr. Drew, dead, living, cargo, and all."

I was silent. His brutal indifference sickened me. I saw the young sailor's eyes flash.

"I'll put off in the dinghy," he said sturdily.

"You'll not make a damned fool of yourself," shouted Playle. "I don't want to lose my dinghy." He suddenly lunged forward with the boat-hook and caught at something that drifted by. It was a corded box. He flung it on deck and told Outen to put it in the foc'sle.

Other things drifted by and many of them were secured. It looked as though Playle were going to reap a rich harvest. And then came the first body, face downwards, almost hidden in the foam. We brought it alongside, and turning it over, saw that it was a Chinaman.

"Put it back," said Playle hoarsely, "let it drift to hell."

"He may be alive," I said indignantly.

"Dead or alive," he replied, "no Chinaman comes aboard my boat to-night." I hesitated, but he seized the body by the arm, and, wrenching it from my grasp, flung it a yard away into the sea. I watched it drifting away into the darkness.

"Look here," I said, "we are two to one, and we mean to save life, whether of Christian or heathen."

"Try it on," Playle answered grimly; "you'll soon find out who is the owner and master of this boat." And

then he resumed his work of rescuing casks and boxes from the sea.

Other bodies came by, but none within reach, and all apparently dead. Then a huge piece of wreckage loomed in sight and bore straight down on us. A dozen figures clung to it shrieking and paralyzed with fear.

"Fend off," yelled Playle, "if you don't want to go to the bottom."

"That's right," cried Outen to me. "Chuck 'em a rope after they've got to the lee of us."

The three of us braced a spare spar against the foot of our mast. A second later the wreckage struck the end of it and splintered it into a dozen pieces. But the impact had saved us. The great black mass deviated slightly from its course and swept by us, just grazing our stern. One man leaped on board, but Playle hit him in the chest and the poor wretch went back howling into the water and disappeared from sight. Outen with a cry of rage seized a coil of rope and flung it with seamanlike accuracy clean over the wreckage, at the same time making the end fast to a strong iron cleet. The rope caught strained and tightened, and creaked, and I could feel the *Dorothy* being pulled back on her anchor chain.

But a second later there was a flash of a knife and Playle had cut the rope.

"Did ye hear my orders?" he yelled. "Do ye want to be thrown overboard? Who's master here?"

For reply the young sailor clenched his fists and sprang at him. Playle dropped his knife and, grasping his opponent in his huge arms, flung him ten feet across the

deck. The young man's head struck a cask and he lay motionless. Playle turned to me, his eyes blazing with fury.

"I don't want to lay hands on you, Mr. Drew," he said, "but you'd best be careful. Mark my words. No Chinaman sets foot on my deck to-night. I'll go into the sea to save a white man, aye, even a nigger. But I'll thank God for every Chinaman that goes to hell to-night."

I cowered against the mast raging but helpless. The man was like a fiend incarnate, and he could have crushed me with one hand.

"You are master here," I said hoarsely, "and I suppose you can render your own account to God."

"I do God's work," he replied, "when I let them drown."

Bodies and cargo continued to float by. I sat by Outen's side till he recovered consciousness. Playle was busy with the boat-hook and the deck was littered with cargo. He paid no attention to either of us.

Then all at once he gave a cry of horror, and, dropping a cask that he was just lifting from the water, he sprang to his feet and, holding on to one of the stays, leaned forward and peered into the foaming sea on our port bow.

I quickly glanced in the same direction and saw what seemed to be a small yellow cask just showing its smooth round surface above the water, and a yard or two behind it I saw another, and behind that yet another.

"Look!" he cried hoarsely. "Do you see it?"

"I see them," I replied sarcastically, "but I'm afraid they are out of reach."

The line of yellow casks drifted past with the tide, and Playle watched them with staring eyes. Then suddenly they sank beneath the water and, when I saw them again, they were ahead of us. I uttered a cry of surprise. *They had moved up against the wind and tide.*

"What are they?" I asked hurriedly. He did not answer, but I could see his great hand shaking as he pointed at the sea. Nothing was now to be seen but white foam.

Then I saw a strange whirl of the waters close to the side of the boat, a great eddy as though something were stirring and heaving beneath them. And then something round and yellow, came to the surface, and I was looking straight into a pair of glittering amber eyes. I reached for the boat-hook, but before I could lay my hand on it, the thing had disappeared. Billy Playle reeled and would have fallen into the water if I had not caught him by the arm. As it was he crashed heavily to the deck in a dead faint.

I am not ashamed to confess that I was almost paralyzed with fear. I realized that whatever had frightened this iron man, this brutal sailor who had sent his fellow men to death with a stern unflinching purpose, must indeed be a horror of almost inconceivable magnitude.

CHAPTER V

THE CROOKED MAN

JACK OUTEN was the first to recover his senses. He raised himself to a sitting posture, and looked round him, still half dazed by the blow which had stunned him. I left Playle and came to his side.

"So you got one in at him," he said, rubbing his eyes; "you did well. He's a fierce hitter, is Billy Playle."

I explained matters to the best of my ability, and by the time I had finished the young sailor was able to stand up and walk across the deck.

"Queer job," he said, moving over to the side of the prostrate man and looking into the scarred and disfigured face. "Kind of sea serpent, I reckon, if there was anything there at all."

"Do you doubt my word?" I said angrily.

"No, sir," he replied, respectfully, "but folks do make mistakes sometimes, even gentlefolk, and it's a poor light to see clearly and what with a man being a bit excited and upset ——"

"Against the wind and tide," I cried hotly. "Moved against the wind and tide, I tell you, man. Can you believe that?"

"Queer currents on these banks, I reckon," he

answered. "A lot of wreckage, I should say, caught in a swirl—and perhaps the head of a dead animal, foreign beast, mebbe. You'll excuse me, sir, but even in my short time I've seen a powerful lot of sea serpents, and they've all turned out to be something else."

I pointed to Billy Playle.

"There is a man," I said, "who's seen a lot more things than you. He fainted—swooned like a girl—and not for a bit of wreckage, I'll wager."

"Nor yet for any animal, living or dead," retorted Outen. "Billy Playle ain't the sort to be scared at anything mortal, beast or man. He saw a ghost, he did; something as you didn't see. He's a man with a lot on his conscience; a hell of a lot, if all tales are true."

"Well, what are we going to do?" I asked.

"Go home, I reckon, when Playle's all right. We're riding snug enough here, but doing no good, and I'd like a bit of bed before morning."

"I mean about Playle," I said sternly. "I take it he's murdered a man to-night."

"Yes," replied the young fellow, with a frown. "In one sense I s'pose he has; but, then, again, in another sense he hasn't."

"Threw him back into the water," I said laconically.

"Um, yes; but it's Playle's boat. He needn't take passengers."

I looked at him in amazement. Was this the same man who had gone for Billy Playle half an hour before?

"You're talking rot," I said angrily. "You know it's murder. What do you mean?"

He was silent, and looked out across the circle of white foam.

"What's your game?" I continued. "You're not one of these Standinghoe ruffians?"

"There's the little girl to be thought of," he said quietly. I looked him straight in the eyes, and they dropped before my gaze. Love was written large on his honest, manly young face, and I hated him for it. I laughed scornfully.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" I said with a sneer.

"Yes, Mr. Drew," he replied simply, "it's like that, and the sooner you understand it the better."

"Well, it's not like that with me," I retorted. "I've no inducement to keep my mouth shut."

"You are a gentleman," he said quietly, "and you know what is due to a woman. Besides, what's your word against the two of us? And s'pose I tell Billy Playle when he comes to? He's just the sort to chuck you into the sea and say you fell overboard."

"And you'd stand by and let him do it, eh, you scoundrel?"

"Aye," he replied stoutly; "if it'd save the girl from harm."

I clenched my fists, and the conversation seemed likely to develop into a brawl, but at that moment Billy Playle opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Don't stare at me," he cried angrily, "I ain't hurt. I get these fits of giddiness now and then."

He pulled out a small glass flask from his pocket, took a long draught of raw spirit, and rose to his feet. Then

he held on to one of the stays, and looked out across the sea.

"We'll get back," he growled. "Lend a hand with the anchor, Mr. Drew."

In less than ten minutes we were under way, and running before the wind towards Standinghoe.

In an hour's time we were tearing up the gut towards the beach, with the foam hissing at our bows, and the long rollers sweeping us forward in a succession of leaps and bounds.

When we had dropped anchor and stowed sail I saw Outen whisper something in Playle's ear. I stepped forward to protect my own interests.

"I'll talk to Mr. Drew," Playle said, gruffly. "He'll be all right when I talk to him."

I turned away and said nothing. Then we all got in the dinghy and went ashore. A crowd at once surrounded us. They had been up all night, and the beach was already strewn with spoil. But none of them had been out to sea, and we were the mark of many fierce and jealous eyes. A hundred questions were asked, but we vouchsafed no reply save that the vessel was full of Chinese and had been lost with all hands. Then we shouldered our way through the throng of eager, envious faces, and reached Playle's house.

Mary Playle, with a white, tired face, was still up, and a substantial meal was set on the table. When she had attended to our wants she said "good-night" and went off to bed. The dawn was now breaking, cold, wet, and tempestuous. The storm showed no signs of abating,

and the wind whistled through the cracks and crannies of the wooden building.

We ate a hearty meal, and washed it down with rum. When we had finished, Outen lit his pipe, said "good-night" in a surly voice, and left the house for his own home.

"Now, then, Mr. Drew," said Playle. "I s'pose you'll be wanting some explanation of to-night's business. I hear you've called me hard names, and mean mischief. I'll just show you something as may alter your opinion."

He rose to his feet, locked both the doors, and took off his coat. I watched him with some apprehension, for it looked uncommonly as though he were preparing for a fight. But he proceeded to take off his waistcoat, and then a heavy blue jersey. Finally he took off his flannel shirt, and stood before me, stripped to the waist. I rose from my chair with a cry of horror at the awful spectacle laid before me.

His great frame, massive and muscular as the torso of Hercules, was a veritable network of livid scars. Every inch of it was seamed and dented, and furrowed with holes and ridges as though pieces of flesh had been cut out of it. The very muscles were twisted and contorted and torn out of their proper place. Even the bones had been crushed and disjointed till they stood out at peculiar angles under the lacerated skin. And to crown all, there was the hideous face, with its nose half gone and its fierce eyes glowing with unfathomable hatred.

"A pretty picture, eh!" he said. "What do you think of it, Mr. Drew? Would you love them as did it; pull

'em out of the sea, give 'em brandy, put 'em on shore? Would you, eh?"

"It is awful," I gasped. "It is hideous. What is it? Who did it? I don't understand."

"I'll tell you," he replied, "when I've put my clothes on. But, perhaps you've not seen enough. Feast your eyes on it a bit. It'll drive home what I've got to say to you. Pretty picture, ain't it?"

"Cover it up," I cried, hiding my face in my hands. "It's too ghastly."

"Aye," he said, "but the sight of it is nothing. Reckon up how it hurt when they carved out that pretty little picture."

He dressed again, flung himself down in a chair, drained a glass of rum, and lit his pipe.

"It hurt considerable," he said, after a pause, "and it was Chinamen as did it. They ain't no bunglers at that sort of work, I can tell you. They know exactly where to cut without killing you, know exactly how far to pull a limb without fetching it off. Shall I tell you the story?"

"Yes," I replied, unsteadily, "but without details, if you don't mind."

He chuckled.

"Eighteen years ago," he said, "I was as straight as you are, Mr. Drew, and there weren't a straighter looking man or more powerful young fellow in these parts, though say I it myself. I was engaged to a handsome girl as loved me well, she did. Life was a pretty good thing in those days, I can tell you. Then I and my

brother Dick—the father of my little niece here—shipped as second and third mates on the *Corunna*. She took out hard ware and came back with tea, she did. A fine vessel too, though I often curse the day I ever heard of her.

“Well, we reached Shanghai and had a month to kick our heels in. Then, as the devil's luck would have it, my brother got hold of some wonderful tale from an old, half crazy fellow in an opium den about folks who made gold as easy as a dairy wench makes cheese, and nothing would do but that we must both go up country and investigate the matter for ourselves.

“We'd saved a bit of money, so we got a fortnight's leave, and, taking the half crazy old jossier as a guide, we went fifty miles inland. There our guide made off one fine night and before morning we found ourselves in the hands of as tough a lot of yellow men as you'd meet in a day's march. They jabbered to us a lot, and we gathered from what we knew of their lingo that we'd put our foot in it, or, to be precise, had trodden on holy ground. The end of it all was that they took us miles further inland, right up into some mountains with snow on the top.” He paused and, refilling his glass drained half of it at a single gulp.

“Find any gold?” I asked.

“Gold?” he cried. “I tell you the place seemed made of it. Common as dirt it was; every blooming thing made of it, just as if it were iron or lead. Couldn't see where they got it from, as there didn't seem to be any mines. But we poked about pretty well trying to find

out, and then—well, they caught us.” He stopped and a terrible look came into his face.

“They caught us poking about,” he continued after a long silence, “and we couldn’t convince them that we hadn’t found out anything. Some damned thing was missing and they thought we’d stolen it. I don’t know to this day what it was. But anyway you have just seen the result. After ten days of a living hell, of tortures devised with loathsome and fiendish ingenuity, they thought I’d panned out and chucked me into a river. But there was still life in my body, and after a month’s concealment I escaped.

“When at last I reached England, after seven months in hospital at Shanghai, I was the thing you see me now. Marriage was out of the question. Even the woman who loved me turned from me with pity and loathing in her eyes.”

“And your brother?” I asked.

“He died the day before I escaped,” Playle said in a low voice. “I saw his death, but it would make you sick if I described it to you. It is enough that he died, and now you know why it is that I’d rather save a devil from hell than a Chinaman from the worst death ever devised by God or man.”

He rose to his feet with his great gnarled fingers clenched and his hideous face working horribly.

“Now, Mr. Drew,” he cried, “will you judge me now as a man judges man?”

“I should have done the same,” I murmured, “but still—of course, it is wrong. A little band of fanatics doesn’t

make a nation. These poor wretches to-night were innocent; they at any rate ——”

“One at least of them was there,” Playle said, gripping me by the arm. “I tell you I saw it—left forefinger missing. That’s one of the devils; it was part of their cursed religion; they cut off their forefingers. I tell you I saw it. It was the fellow I chucked back in the water. Come down and have a look at the dead to-morrow. It’ll be a rare feast, I reckon.”

I rose to my feet.

“I shall say nothing about what happened to-night,” I said, holding out my hand. He took it for a moment, dropped it, and shuffled towards the door.

“Good-night to you,” he replied; “I’d offer you a bed if I had one. I have the rooms but no bed.”

“Tell me,” I said, as we stood on the threshold, “what was it that you saw to-night on the Sunken Sands?”

“I saw a deal of things,” he replied.

“When you fainted,” I continued, “there was something in the water. What was it?”

“Some casks,” he replied; “at least, I think so.”

“Moving against wind and tide?” I queried.

“There are odd currents on the banks,” he said. “Good-night, Mr. Drew.”

“Why did you faint?” I asked doggedly.

“I do sometimes,” he replied. “I suffer a good deal of pain. Good-night.”

I turned on my heel and, buffeted by wind and rain, made my way to Trunions. And, as I walked home, I wondered why Billy Playle had told me an obvious lie about the thing he had seen on the Sunken Sands.

CHAPTER VI

GABRIEL'S HOUNDS

THE next morning I did not come down until eleven o'clock, and even that late hour gave me but a short night's rest. My uncle sat with me while I had my breakfast. I said nothing of my meeting with him the night before, and he did not refer to it. He asked me, however, if I had thrown away the yellow box and I told him I had concealed it where neither he nor any one else would be ever likely to find it.

I then proceeded to tell him about the wreck, omitting, however, all reference to Playle's brutality, and the curious thing I had seen in the sea. He betrayed considerable interest in my narrative and cross-questioned me at some length about the details. I noticed that he was pale and that there were dark rings under his eyes, as though he had passed a sleepless night.

When I had given him all the information that I chose, I suggested that we should both walk over to Standinghoe and see whether any bodies had been washed up on the beach. He assented, as I thought, with some eagerness, and half an hour later we were both walking along the bank towards the little fishing village.

The rain had stopped, but it still blew half a gale from the northeast. The tide was out and a dull leaden sea beat angrily on the edge of the mud flats nearly a mile

away. I noticed that my uncle frequently glanced at my face as we went along. I at once surmised that he was endeavoring to gather from some glance or expression on my part where I had hidden the box the night before. I was careful to give him no clue as to its whereabouts, and I looked neither to the right nor the left until we were more than a mile from home.

When we reached Standinghoe we found the whole male population on the beach, while little groups of women and children stood at the cottage doors and occasionally craned forward to try and see what was going on. But a thick barrier of men concealed whatever lay beyond them.

We walked down the bank of mud artificially hardened by the tons and tons of pebbles which had been thrown upon it and edged our way into the crowd. The men touched their hats with an air of surly independence and many eyes were turned on Sir Gilbert, whose visits to Standinghoe might have been counted on the fingers of one hand. Billy Playle came up to me and held out his hand.

"No worse for last night, Mr. Drew?" he asked.

"Not a bit, Playle," I replied. "What's up?"

"They're coming in," he said; "they're coming in. Like to have a look at 'em?"

He elbowed his way through the men, and we followed him. A row of stiff little bodies lay on the beach. They had been carefully arranged in a straight line, and their yellow expressionless faces made them look like so many dolls laid out in a shop window.

"Pretty sight, ain't it?" said Playle, with a grin. My uncle looked at them with swift eager glances, and then his features hardened into an inscrutable mask.

"It's a blessing they ain't Christian folk," continued Playle, "ain't it, Sir Gilbert? No good heaving prayers for these, eh?" The crowd laughed, and my uncle turned to them with a contemptuous smile.

"I know some Christians," he said, quietly, "who are not worth praying for." Then he moved further down the slope, and, walking along the line, inspected it as though he had been a general at a review.

Then, as he bent down over one man, I saw him start. But he immediately recovered his composure, and continued his examination. When he had finished, he turned to Playle.

"There are twenty bodies here," he said in a low voice. "Eight of them have the forefinger of the left hand missing. How do you account for it?"

"One of their heathen tricks, Sir Gilbert," the man replied, but I saw the fire leap into his eyes, and remembered what he had told me a few hours previously.

"Have you ever been in China?" asked my uncle.

"Aye, once," said Playle; "just once."

"Ever heard of this custom of mutilating the forefinger?"

"Can't recall it," the man replied; "but it don't matter how many fingers they've got now they're dead."

A man came round rattling a small tin.

"For the dead," he chanted mournfully; "for the

dead! For the dead!" The sailors dropped coins into it—silver for the most part.

"Eh, what?" said my uncle, as the tin was shaken in front of him.

"A bit for decent burial, sir," said the man.

Sir Gilbert hesitated, and then saw Playle's keen eyes fixed upon his face. He drew out a sovereign and dropped it in the tin. The box was offered to Playle, and he spat in it.

"I'll give ye ten pounds," he cried, "if you let 'em rot on the mud."

My uncle gave him a keen look from under his shaggy white eyebrows, and then turned away.

"A rough brute," he said, as we walked back to Trunions, "but no fool."

"Not fool enough to contribute money for a wild orgie to-night," I replied.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he said. "Well, I dare say the money is as well spent that way."

When we reached home we had lunch. Then my uncle retired to his study. Several times during the afternoon, as I passed the door, I heard his sonorous voice uplifted in prayer.

We dined together that night, and had a long talk about my future. Towards ten o'clock my uncle suggested a breath of fresh air, and we strolled up and down a small graveled terrace on the south side of the house.

The wind still blew cold from the sea, but the sky in the east was clear, and the rising moon shone over a wide expanse of stormy waters. To the west the wet mud

of the creeks and channels was glorified into silver. The breeze hissed in the reeds and grasses, and the waves beat far away on the edge of the flats. These were the only sounds in the night.

We both stood in silence and smoked our cigars. My uncle seemed to be lost in thought, and his eyes were fixed on the pathway made by the moon across the troubled waters. My own fancies were of Mary Playle, and her image blotted out all the events of the last twenty-four hours.

"Ebb and flow," said my uncle, after a long pause; "ebb and flow; and the wind dies, as the water ebbs, and then—there is a calm."

I glanced at him, and the sadness in his voice touched me to the heart.

"They say men die, Harry, as the tide ebbs," he continued, "and yet to-night I feel afraid of the flood-tide. The mud there seems to me like a broad rampart between me and some danger, the very nature of which I cannot guess. When the tide comes in and the rampart is submerged in foam, then, too, will come the danger, riding on the crest of the waves, close to my very walls."

I did not answer him, and then in the silence I heard a faint noise overhead like the distant barking of dogs, the yelping music of a pack in full cry.

"Whatever is that?" I asked.

We both looked up into the sky, but I at any rate could see nothing.

"Garbriel's hounds," he said quietly. "They are hunting some soul to-night."

"Wild geese, eh?" I retorted sharply, for my uncle's melancholy was beginning to affect my nerves. I knew the legend well, but I had never heard the birds before.

"Yes," he replied; "wild geese. You know what they mean?"

"There are so many legends about them," I said, with a smile, "but I believe they foretell some impending disaster."

"They are hunting some soul to-night," he replied, grimly. "Let us turn in. It is getting cold."

I was glad once more to get into the light and shelter of the house, and followed him into the library.

"We will have prayers," he said, and, opening the Bible, he read the story of Dives and Lazarus. When he had finished, he commenced, as was his custom, to discourse on what he had just read, and he spoke with terrible fervor of the sufferings of the rich man in hell. Then he fell suddenly on his knees and prayed that we both might be delivered from everlasting torment. He poured out his whole soul in the prayer, wringing his hands together as though in agony, and with tears running down his cheeks. It was a long piteous appeal, the cry of a drowning man, the shriek of one who feels the waters closing over his head.

"Lord, save me or I perish!" he cried, and then was silent, crouching on the floor like a wounded animal.

In a minute or two he rose to his feet, and said "Good-night" to me.

"You look as if you wanted rest," I said as I grasped his hand.

"I do want rest," he replied, "yet I must watch and pray to-night—till the tide comes in."

I left him, but half an hour later I returned for my cigarette case. He was on his knees, and did not notice either my going or my coming.

I slept soundly that night, and did not wake till nine o'clock in the morning. My uncle was not down to breakfast, but, as he had probably sat up very late, this circumstance did not surprise me. When I had finished my solitary meal the chambermaid came in and said that Sir Gilbert Drew was not in his bedroom, and that his bed had not been slept in.

I made for the study, where I had last seen my uncle, and found the door locked. It occurred to me that he had probably fallen asleep over his devotions, and I knocked loudly enough to wake the soundest sleeper. But there was no reply, and though I kicked and banged the panels with my fists, no sound came from behind the closed door.

I then began to get alarmed and, putting my shoulder to the woodwork, I exerted all my strength and sent the door splintering away from the lock. The room, however, was empty, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I had fully expected to see my uncle dead in his chair. But I saw at a glance that something out of the ordinary had happened. I called the butler and closed the broken door in the faces of the other servants.

"Well, Simson," I said, "what do you make of it?" The staid servant slowly inspected the room.

"An upset, sir," he replied solemnly. "That's what I call it. Burglars I should say, sir."

The room had been literally turned inside out, ransacked from floor to ceiling, and from wall to wall. Drawers had been broken open and emptied; half the books on the shelves were on the floor; papers were heaped up and strewn about in all directions. The carpet had been torn up and thrown into a corner. Some one had evidently made a thorough search of the room for some particular object that they wished to find

"Well, Simson," I said, "this is a nice business. Police wanted, eh?"

He shook his head sadly.

"Sir Gilbert run amuck," he said, "that's what it is, and that's what comes of too much religion. I goes to church, and I ——"

"That'll do, Simson," I said sharply. "Just come here." He joined me at the window where I had been carefully examining the woodwork for some clue to the affair.

"Was that here yesterday?" I asked, pointing to a large spar which had been carried up by the water to the very foot of our wall.

"No, sir," he replied with confidence. He was at last on known ground.

"You can go," I said curtly, "and tell Jenkins to ride into Sneathing for the police."

When he had gone I looked out on the sea and recalled my uncle's words.

"When the tide comes in, then too will come the danger, riding on the crest of the waves, close to the very walls."

CHAPTER VII

THE SEARCH

A LONG and arduous search throughout the whole of that day contributed but little to our stock of knowledge. We explored the house from cellar to attic, dragged the moat, and made inquiries everywhere within a radius of ten miles. The result was practically nil. My uncle had completely disappeared and had not left a single clue by which he could be traced. A room turned upside down either by himself or some person unknown, and a fragment of wreckage against the sea wall. That was all we had to build a theory on. It was too slight a foundation, and one explanation after another toppled to the ground.

A careful and thorough examination of the library revealed the fact that nothing, of which any one had any knowledge, was missing. It was clear, therefore, that it had been visited by no ordinary thief, but possibly by some one in search of one of my uncle's papers. A quiet consideration of the facts destroyed the theory that he had made all the disturbance with his own hands. It was hardly likely that he would break open all the locks.

The next day an eminent detective came down from London. He quickly assimilated the result of our investigation, and then made some of his own. At the end of two days he asked for a few words with me in private.

"I will tell you the truth," he said, when we were seated in the library. "I have discovered nothing. It rained heavily on the night of your uncle's disappearance——"

"It was fine when I went to bed," I interrupted.

"Possibly," he continued, "but I have ascertained that it rained heavily between two o'clock and four o'clock. All footprints were washed away. Inside the house there is no clue whatever. It is possible that there might have been the marks of wet feet. You did not examine the carpet?" I confessed that I had not.

"All moisture would have dried by the time I came on the scene," he continued. "A dirty, wet foot would have left mud. I could not find any. I am afraid that the circumstantial evidence is practically nil. We shall have, therefore, to rely on internal evidence, on motive, on your uncle's character, on his past life. It is with reference to these matters that I wish to talk to you."

"I will give you all the information in my power," I replied.

"Well, in the first place," he began, taking out a pencil and consulting a small piece of dirty paper, "do you know of any document or anything else that it would be to any one's interest to steal?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"Have any strangers come to the neighborhood lately?" I smiled.

"A good many came a night or two ago," I replied grimly. "The men of Standinghoe took 'em from the sea and buried 'em."

"A wreck, eh?" he asked. "Any one saved?"

"Not a soul."

"H'm. Do you know the name of the ship or anything about her?"

"I don't know her name, but she was Chinese and there were Chinamen on board."

The detective stared at the carpet and bit his finger nails.

"Chinese vessel," he said, after a long pause. "A bit unusual, eh? Ever heard of a Chinese vessel coming over here before?"

"Never," I replied, "but I saw it close with my own eyes. It was a Chinese junk." I did not tell him what else I had seen or he might have discounted the value of my evidence.

"Was your uncle ever in China?" he asked.

"Not that I know of," I replied.

"Did he keep a diary?"

I nodded my head.

"You might glance through it," he said. "It might give us a clue. Now it is possible that no misfortune has overtaken Sir Gilbert Drew, but that he has simply, for some reason or other, fled from the neighborhood."

"It is possible," I replied; "but it is hardly likely that he could have done so unobserved. He is well known for miles round."

"He might have escaped by sea," said the detective. "At high tide there is deep water against the house."

"There seems no reason for such a peculiar proceeding."

"None at present," the detective replied thoughtfully. "And I'm not even sure that we need look for one. Sir Gilbert Drew has apparently been strange in his manner of late. He has lost nearly all his money and it seems to have turned his brain. He has, so I am told, been strongly moved by a religious mania, in itself an extraordinary thing for a man who has scoffed at religion all his life. Common enough, I grant you, among the lower classes, as the records of the Salvation Army will show, but most unusual in a man of intellect and refinement. I should not be surprised to hear that his mental balance is now completely upset."

"And that he is alive?" I asked eagerly.

"With a madman's cunning he may have eluded all pursuit. On the other hand, he may have killed himself."

"Or he may have been murdered," I said angrily, "or may have been abducted—in short, Mr. Rosick, neither you nor I know anything about it."

"I am seeking information from you," he replied quietly. "When I get it, my experience will enable me to make use of it to the best advantage. I should like to know how your uncle lost his money."

"I cannot tell you," I said, "for I don't know. But when I have been through his papers——"

"Please do so to-night," he interrupted hastily. "And the diaries. In the meanwhile I am going over to Standinghoe."

He rose to his feet and looked at me with a curious expression in his eyes. He had a heavy massive face,

almost bovine in appearance, but his shrewd gray eyes bored into me like gimlets.

"Is there nothing else you can tell me, Mr. Drew?" he said. "Can't you think of anything that would throw light on the matter?"

"No," I replied, and my voice was firm for a man who was telling a deliberate lie. I had as yet said nothing about the yellow box or the important but mysterious part it seemed to play in my uncle's life. Half a dozen times it had been on my lips to mention the matter, but I was always checked by the thought that, if my uncle were still alive, I was bound in honor to keep his secret.

"Nothing?" he repeated quietly. "Well, just think it over." I flared up and flushed angrily.

"I am paying you well," I said. "You do not expect me to do the work."

He laughed merrily.

"When a patient calls in a doctor," he replied, "the doctor is obliged to ask a lot of questions before he can diagnose the disease. It is your business to give information. It is mine to make use of it. Good-afternoon, Mr. Drew. I will have another talk to you after breakfast to-morrow. I shall sleep in Standinghoe to-night."

He left the room, and I felt somehow as though I had made a fool of myself.

Directly after dinner I went into the library, locked the door, and started an examination of my uncle's diaries. They extended over a period of thirty-five years, and were eminently brief and businesslike.

"Went to such and such a place," "met so and so;"

"did this and that," and so on. Mere diaries of events, unencumbered with any remarks on people or incidents. They formed a curt narrative of ordinary events in a man's life, and were in no sense of the word private. They were for the eyes of any servant that chose to read them. My uncle had never been to China, nor, indeed, farther east than Vienna. I noticed, however, that one year was missing, and in spite of a careful search I failed to find the volume. It was for the year 1870.

It was nearly midnight when I had finished the diaries, but, late as it was, I turned my attention to the papers and documents. The safe was locked, but to my surprise I found the two keys in one of the drawers of the writing table. I opened it, and saw that it had been ransacked like the rest of the room. It was nearly empty, and its contents were probably among the pile of papers on the floor.

I carefully examined everything, and by the time I had completed my task the sun was shining across the sea into the windows. I had discovered at least one fact of importance, and, placing my uncle's check book, pass book, will, and a few other papers, in my pocket, went up-stairs for a few hours' sleep.

At ten-thirty Inspector Rosick called, and I interviewed him over the breakfast table. He declined, however, to discuss matters till I had finished my meal, and gave me a little quiet advice about dyspepsia, and diverting the blood from the stomach to the brain.

When I had finished, I offered him a cigar, and, lighting

one myself, took some papers out of my pocket and sorted them.

"I have here," I said, "my uncle's check book, and pass book. I have gone through them carefully and have discovered the cause of his poverty. During the last six months he has given away to hospitals, homes, and charities of every description the enormous sum of £2,000,000. He has given over £1,000,000 for furthering the cause of religion among the heathen, and nearly £1,000,000 towards the building and restoration of churches and cathedrals."

Mr. Rosick opened his eyes wide, and gave a low whistle of surprise.

"This is religion with a vengeance," he said; "all his goods to the poor, eh? Relations left out in the cold, eh! It is worse than I thought."

I remembered the parable of the rich young man, and my uncle's earnest face as he spoke on the text. I was up in arms at once.

"He has acted up to the highest Christian principles," I said vehemently. "He has left himself a mere pittance. I never realized how good a man he was."

Mr. Rosick laughed.

"H'm, yes," he said. "Left himself a mere pittance, and then—retired. It is you who are the sufferer, Mr. Drew, whereas he—well, perhaps he wished to make his peace with his Maker."

"You think that he is dead?" I queried.

"I am sure of it now," the man replied. "I venture

to think also that he had some great sin upon his conscience, and that he wished to atone for it before he died. Was your grandfather a rich man?"

"Only fairly well off," I replied.

"How did your uncle get his money?"

"I don't know," I said curtly. "He has had it as long as I can remember."

"I think it might be useful to find out."

"I don't approve of all this prying into my uncle's affairs," I answered. "It scarcely seems decent. Here is a man absent for three days, and we have made ourselves masters of all his private papers."

"That is why I left the matter in your hands, Mr. Drew," Rosick replied gently. "I thought perhaps you would not care for a stranger—but is there anything else you would like to tell me?"

"I have my uncle's will here," I said, unfolding a large sheet of foolscap paper. "He leaves everything to me, and appoints me sole executor. Perhaps you would like to see it," and I held it out towards him, half hoping that he would take no interest in it, but at the same time willing to ease my conscience in regard to a matter I had concealed from him.

He took it from me and ran his eye over its contents. Then I saw his forehead wrinkle, and his eyes narrow to mere slits.

"And I do beseech my nephew, Harry Drew," he read aloud, "to take a certain yellow box, which he will find in my safe, and destroy the same, or else cast it into the sea where no man can ever set eyes on it again. I im-

plore him to do this for his own happiness and for the peace of my own soul."

"There is no yellow box in the safe," I replied, "so I suppose he destroyed it, and forgot to alter the clause in his will."

"H'm," said Mr. Rosick, thoughtfully, "that is possible. On the other hand, it may have been stolen, and by the very person who ransacked the room on the night of Sir Gilbert's disappearance."

I smiled, knowing well enough where it was.

"Well, it doesn't matter," I said. "In any case my uncle's wishes have been carried out. It has gone. Now, with reference to the diaries, there is nothing in them. My uncle has never been in China, or out of Europe. But one year—1870—is missing."

"Thank you," he said, making a note on his shirt cuff. "Anything else?"

"Some letters from a large firm of goldsmiths offering him certain prices for various articles made of gold. He was, as perhaps you have heard, inordinately fond of the precious metal, and this house a short time ago was full of it. He sold everything."

Mr. Rosick nodded.

"Has your uncle any brothers living?" he asked.

I told him of one, Dr. William Drew, of Harley Street. He rose to his feet.

"I shall go up to town to-day," he said, "and think matters over for a day or two. I shall also call on Dr. Drew and find out where Sir Gilbert was in 1870."

"You seem to be going rather far afield," I said.

"One can never go too far," he replied. "I should not be at all surprised to hear that your uncle was in China in 1870. But I wish I could lay hands on that yellow box.

And, as I went to bed that night, I thought over all that Mr. Rosick had said, and came to the conclusion that he was a very sensible man. I had no longer any doubt that the library had been ransacked for the box, and I resolved to recover it from the mud at the earliest opportunity, break it open, and see what light it threw on matters that were still in darkness.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE CELLARS

A MONTH passed and still nothing was heard of Sir Gilbert Drew. We had not discovered the smallest clue to his disappearance; we had nothing whatever to go upon, and could not advance along any definite line of search. There was no doubt in my own mind that he was dead and lay either at the bottom of the sea or buried deep in the slime of the creeks.

Mr. Rosick, who was gifted with considerable powers of imagination, was still of opinion that the wreck of the Chinese junk and the mystery of the yellow box were in some way or other connected with the matter, but this theory was entirely unsupported by any evidence. The detective had, however, ascertained the following facts which were interesting but valueless.

(1) That Sir Gilbert Drew was abroad in 1870, that he left England early in January and did not return till Christmas Day, and that during the whole of this time nothing whatever was heard of him, nor did he even inform his relations where he had been. It was generally understood, however, that he had been in South America.

(2) That shortly after his return he had come into the Drew property, which at that time was so heavily encumbered that it barely produced £400 a year.

(3) That three years later he was a very rich man.

(4) That his wealth was attributed to a fortunate investment in a South American gold mine which he had purchased for a few hundred pounds, and that he never denied or confirmed this report.

Mr. Rosick attached considerable importance to these facts, though he admitted that they presented no solution of the difficulty.

"Here," he said, "is a man who suddenly springs from poverty to wealth, and many years afterwards gives all his wealth away and disappears. His disappearance is obviously connected with his financial affairs. If we could discover how he obtained his wealth we should probably have a clue to his disappearance. For my own part I feel certain that the yellow box contains a solution of the whole mystery."

But the yellow box still lay deep and silent in its bed of mud. Half a dozen times I had been down to the place fully intending to bring it to light again. But each time something had restrained me—the recollection of my uncle's face, of his bitter passionate words, of the written caution in his will. "I implore him to do this for his own happiness and for the peace of my soul," and each time I had looked at the marks on the stone causeway and returned to Trunions. And each time I had cursed myself for a coward, realizing that it was fear—fear of some indefinable disaster—that had turned me from my purpose.

It was now generally believed that Sir Gilbert Drew was dead, and I obtained permission to administer his af-

fairs until proof of his death were forthcoming. I found that I should have a bare £400 a year to live on, not much for a young man who had had an allowance of £2,000 a year, and no household expenses to pay out of it. However, I set myself to try and make two ends meet. I dismissed all the servants but Simson, the cook, and a maid, sold all my horses at Oxford and my yacht at Standinghoe, paid my debts, and resolved to lead a life of strict economy.

Another month passed and all public interest in the "Mystery of the Marshes," as one paper called it, had died away. I was already heartily sick of juggling with shillings and pence. I had been used to luxury all my life, and I don't think the possession of fabulous wealth would have troubled me. Again and again during this period of cheese paring my thoughts reverted to the barbaric magnificence of Trunions in the old days, to the gold plates and spoons and forks, to the great gold shield in the hall, glittering with the armorial bearings of my family. And again and again I wondered whether the possession of the yellow box would restore the splendor that my uncle had torn off him as though it had been the poisoned shirt of Medea.

Beyond Rosick's theories I had no reason to believe that the box had any connection with my uncle's wealth, but for all that I was sorely tempted to see what it contained. I knew well enough that no question of my future unhappiness or the peace of my uncle's soul would stand in my way if by any means I could change

my present state of poverty for the glories of unbounded wealth.

Then towards the end of August I made a discovery which induced me to cast all scruples to the winds, and even the fear of some unknown peril was not strong enough to turn me from the pursuit of riches.

One evening, an hour before dinner, a miserable meal which I still dignified by that high-sounding name, I had occasion to visit the wine cellar. My uncle had always been particularly proud of his wines and never allowed any one to visit the cellar but himself. However, since his death—or, to speak more correctly, his disappearance—I had left the choice of wines in the hands of Simson.

But on this particular occasion I wished to ascertain the extent and value of the stock with a view to selling it, and I descended myself into the dark and spacious vaults which ran under the whole house. Simson preceded me with a lantern.

It was not, of course, my first visit to the cellars, but I had never explored them to their full extent. As a boy I had never been allowed to enter them, and for many years the romance of the unknown had invested them with a certain mysterious interest. Many a tale of dark and lawless adventure had I woven about their depths. I remember well how I used to stand at the head of the stone steps which led down to them and watch my uncle disappear from sight, how the light would grow fainter and fainter, and then how a door would open and close with a crash, and all would be darkness.

The ideas of one's childhood never entirely leave the

mind of the full-grown man, and, as I descended the steps with the prosaic Simson for the unromantic purpose of taking stock, I experienced a faint thrill of excitement. The cellars had, of course, been thoroughly explored in the search for my uncle, but I had left the task to the police and servants.

The thick walls were wet with a thin green slime and they glistened in the light of the lamp. The floor was below the level of the sea at high tide, and damp and slippery with a kind of fungoid growth. On every side rose tier after tier of bottles, the necks sticking out of the bins like guns from a fort. I went from bin to bin with a pencil and note-book, while Simson chanted to me the song of the wine; an unending string of names, dates, and figures rolled out unctuously. His voice echoed with magnificent effect whenever he came to a particularly choice vintage.

From one vault we passed on to another, and so on, and so on, till I could scarcely remember how many we had visited. Door after door, heavily clamped with rusty iron, was unlocked and closed behind us, till we seemed, to have gone miles into the bowels of the earth. In time however, we came to the last room, and I noticed a small flight of stone steps running up to the ceiling.

"Where do those lead to?" I asked.

"They used to lead to the library, sir," replied Simson. "Sir Gilbert used to come down this way sometimes, but he had the door at the top blocked up about six months ago."

"I don't remember a door in the library, Simson," I said.

"You wouldn't, sir," he answered. "I never knew of it myself till it was blocked up. It was hidden in the paneling. I remember Sir Gilbert telling me that this room was not really part of the cellar, but had only been thrown into it, so to speak. It used to be a secret hiding place, or dungeon, or something of that sort, sir."

"Oh," I said, and then, after a pause, "I suppose this room was very carefully examined by the police."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"A snug hiding place, eh?"

"Oh, very snug, sir."

"Not much wine in it," I continued, examining the walls carefully.

"Yet every bottle a gem, sir, if I may say so. Nothing here, sir, worth less than a sovereign a bottle, sir."

"Give me the lantern."

He held it out to me, and, taking it from his hand I made a thorough inspection of the floor and walls.

"Can you move those bins?" I said.

"Move the bins!" he gasped in horror. "Lord love you, sir, it'd be criminal; shake up the wine, sir."

"They must be moved," I said quietly.

"Oh, don't, Sir Harry," he cried piteously; "your poor uncle ——"

"Move them," I said sternly, "and don't call me Sir Harry again."

He took off his coat, and I helped him to shift the bins from the wall. When they had all been placed in the

centre of the floor I took the lantern and examined the walls carefully. Simson, ruffled and perspiring, frowned at me. I discovered nothing.

Then an idea struck me, and, walking away from the wall, I examined it from a distance. I remembered that often a bird's-eye view will detect differences of color that are not apparent to a close and minute scrutiny. I was rewarded. Three sides of the wall presented one dull, unbroken blur of mouldy green, but the fourth was not so uniform in its coloring, and I thought I could detect a patch some four feet square that was just a shade lighter than the surrounding masonry.

I went close up to it, and, taking out my handkerchief, rubbed away the coating of slime from one of the stones. I then went outside the patch and repeated the process on another stone. Then I compared the color of the two stones, both close and at a distance. They were identical.

"H'm," I said to myself; "but he could have used old stone."

And once more I rubbed the wall, but this time along the joint between two stones, and this time I found what I was looking for. The mortar between the slabs of masonry was new. It had been smeared over with dirt; but now I had removed the dirt it stood out as a thin white line.

I tried another part of the cellar, and saw that the mortar was old and not to be distinguished from the surrounding stonework.

"To-morrow," I said to Simson, who watched me with

an impassive face, "you will get a couple of men with pickaxes and crowbars and we will make a hole in this wall."

"Very good, Sir Harry," he replied, and then hastily correcting himself, "very good, sir; very good, sir."

CHAPTER IX

THE SECRET OF THE CELLAR

THE next day two sturdy laborers, armed with pickaxes and crowbars, were ushered into my library by Simson.

I told them briefly what I required them to do.

"It will mean a couple of days' work," I said. "In the ordinary course of events I should pay you ten shillings apiece. I do not, however, wish the people round here to gossip about my private affairs, and, if you will both agree to keep your mouths shut, I will give you each a couple of pounds."

The men looked at each other with bucolic cunning and swore in picturesque language that they wouldn't gossip.

I first turned them on to the passage from the library to the cellar, and they made short work of this. The doorway had been filled up with a single thickness of brick, and with long intervals of rest between the removal of each brick, their task only occupied them till lunch time.

I then took them down into the cellar itself, roughly scratched out the outline of the supposed doorway, and left them under the supervision of Simson, with instructions that no one was to go the other side of the wall until I had been called on the scene.

All through the afternoon I sat in the library overhead and heard the dull thud of blows in the cellar beneath. I occupied my time by perusing my uncle's Bible and noting the various passages he had marked with a blue pencil. They all related to the evils of wealth, and the blessings of poverty. This continual harping on one theme irritated me, and I closed the book with a frown. I told myself that poverty was a burden not to be borne by a man of mettle.

But for all that, as I leaned back in my chair with a pipe between my teeth, I experienced a slight feeling of uneasiness, and for a few moments I almost wished that I had left the cellar as it was. From below came the steady muffled thud of the workmen's crowbars. For some reason or other I fancied that they were hewing out a grave from the solid rock.

Then I recovered myself and laughed aloud at my own fears.

"It is not a grave they are digging," I said to myself, "but a mine—a gold mine," for I still imagined that the secret of my uncle's wealth was walled up behind that barrier of stone.

Then my reverie was broken by a shriek of terror ; I heard the clang of steel as though some one had dropped a crowbar on to the stone flags, and then the stampede of feet up the staircase to the library. A few seconds later the white face of Simson appeared, and then the two laborers came in view, stumbling over one another, and cursing horribly.

"It be devil's work, it be," cried one of them. "Gi' us

our money. We've made a hole big enough for ye to crawl through if ye be such a damned fool. Gi' us our money, I say, and let us go home."

"What is the matter, Simson?" I asked. "Have these fools gone mad?"

"There's something in there," he replied in a shaking voice.

"Well, what is it?" I asked sharply.

"We see'd summat move," said one of the men.

"Are you going to finish your work?" I asked.

"We've made a hole for you," the fellow replied, "and we don't go back for twenty pound, we don't."

"Is the hole big enough, Simson?"

"Yes, sir," he replied, "but I'd have it filled up again, I would; indeed I would, sir."

"Rubbish," I replied, and taking some gold out of my pocket, I paid the men two pounds apiece. "You can go," I continued. "I'll finish the work myself. But remember what I told you. If any gossip comes to my ears you'll have a bad time. You work on one of my farms, I believe? Well, you'd better be careful."

The men pocketed their money and shuffled out of the room.

"Now then, Simson," I said, "what's all this fuss about?"

"There's something in there, sir," he said, "something moved, and a pair of eyes shone in the darkness."

"There is a room the other side of the wall, then?"

"Yes, sir, but I implore you to have it bricked up

again, sir. Sir Gilbert had very good reasons, must have had very good reasons, for closing it up."

"Apparently I shall have some difficulty in getting any one to do the work," I replied. "And if there was anything in there and it's alive, it will probably be out by now. Listen, what is that?"

A faint sound came up the staircase. A shuffling, scraping sound, and then the clink of steel, as though some iron instrument were being moved along the stone floor. I went to the open space in the paneling and listened. The sound was quite distinct. Some heavy body was moving about in the cellar beneath.

"Who's that?" I cried out. There was no reply, and only an idiot could have expected one. Then I saw two small specks of light at the foot of the dark staircase, the shuffling sound grew louder, and I could even see the darkness move beneath me. I moved swiftly back from the entrance.

"Whatever is there, Simson," I cried, "is coming. Catch hold of the poker." But the valiant Simson gave a cry of terror and fled headlong from the room. I was left to face the situation alone. I quickly opened one of the drawers of the writing table and took out a revolver. And then, standing well away from the entrance to the cellar, I waited.

I am not ashamed to confess that I endured the suspense with no great show of courage. The whole scene had worked itself up to a situation that called for strong nerves. The sudden tumbling up-stairs of the white faced men, the two glittering eyes in the darkness, the myste-

rious movement of some great body coming nearer and nearer, the knowledge that whatever was coming, man, beast, or devil, had been entombed for many months in a grave of solid rock, all combined to produce an overwhelming sense of fear. The suspense was torture to me, and the revolver shook in my hand. I had half a mind to rush forward and fire blindly down the staircase into the darkness. But I was man enough to restrain myself. Perhaps, after all, there would be no necessity to kill. Perhaps it was a case for pity, for assistance.

I waited with my eyes fixed on the black space in the panelling. It could not have taken very long for even a snail to have crawled up that short flight of stairs, but it seemed more than an hour from the time Simson left the room till the first appearance of anything in the doorway.

Then a bar of yellow light shot out from the darkness and disappeared so quickly that my eye failed to grasp what it actually was. But the second time it came out more slowly, and there was more of it, and I saw that it was the head and neck of an enormous snake. And the third time it appeared, it stayed, and foot after foot of a great yellow body, thickening to the girth of a big man, came gliding and coiling across the carpet.

For a moment the sight seemed to fascinate me, and with my eyes fixed on the extraordinary and unexpected apparition I shrank backwards into the furthest corner of the room. Then, as I realized that I was faced with a physical and actual danger, my presence of mind returned to me, and with it a courage that I never lacked in mo-

ments of bodily peril. I raised my revolver with a steady hand and fired.

The bullet passed clean through the monster's jaws and splintered the stone mantelpiece. The great brute writhed and lashed with such fury that a table and three chairs were shattered into fragments against the wall. I fired again and missed, and yet again, and this time the bullet buried itself in the thick body. The room became a blur of yellow as the snake twisted to and fro and thrashed the floor with blows that rattled like the roar of musketry.

I looked in vain for a definite mark and fired blindly into the whirlpool of flesh. And this time my bullet found a vital spot. The great snake writhed and knotted itself in its death agony. Then suddenly it whipped its whole length round the writing table, crushed the solid mahogany drawers, desk and all into a shapeless mass of splinters, as though it had been a match-box, and lay perfectly still, save for a faint quivering beneath its yellow skin.

I came out of my corner and kicked the body with one foot. It did not stir, and I could see that the creature was dead. I rang the bell, and in a few moments Simson thrust his white face round the half open door.

"Don't be afraid," I said quietly, "but help me to get this animal out of the room. It's quite dead. I'd rather we did it by ourselves if we can."

We exerted all our strength and in half an hour's time, with the aid of ropes, pulleys, and levers, we succeeded in hoisting the huge carcase through the window.

It was high tide and there were four feet of water under the sill. The body dropped with a splash that drenched us from head to foot and disappeared.

"That'll be all right," I said. "If the tide doesn't carry it out it will sink in the mud."

"It's the devil, sir," moaned Simson. "There is devil's work in all this. Shut up for months in that vault and still alive! And Sir Gilbert a-prayin' and a-prayin' over-head to be delivered from it, and you, sir, taking it into your head to——"

"That'll do, Simson," I said abruptly. "The thing is dead and there's an end of it. Let us go down into the cellar and see what else we can find."

"No, no, sir, I implore you," cried the butler.

"Don't be an ass," I said sharply, refilling the chambers of my revolver.

"Oh, if I only had a pistol like you, sir," he moaned. "I wouldn't mind if I had a pistol, sir."

"I should," I replied. "I've no wish to get shot. Catch hold of the poker and come along. I'll go first. Where's the lantern?"

"Down there, sir."

"Out, I suppose," I said sharply. "Well go and get another, and be quick."

In a few minutes Simson returned with another lantern and we descended the stone steps into the cellar. I went first with the lantern in one hand and my revolver in the other. The butler crept behind with the poker, looking for all the world like a timid burglar.

We found the other lantern and re-lit it, so that there

should be no lack of light. The workmen's tools were lying where they had thrown them. Simson exchanged his poker for a pickaxe.

The hole in the wall was of an irregular shape and about three feet in diameter at the widest part. The floor of the cellar was strewn with broken stone, and I could see that the workmen had not been idle. They had been hewing at a wall more than two feet in thickness. The inner stonework was new and yellow and the outer old and gray. It was clear that this was not accidental, but part of a definite plan to conceal all trace of an opening.

I thrust the lantern through the aperture and saw a room about sixteen feet square. In one corner was a large bed of hay, and in another a pile of coal or coke. There was nothing alive to be seen, and, placing my revolver in my pocket, I crawled through the hole and examined the room closely. The air was heavy with an unpleasant smell, but it was quite easy to breathe in it. I rather wondered at this, as the floor lay three or four feet beneath the opening and one would have expected a thick deposit of carbonic acid gas on it.

I soon discovered, however, that the room had an outlet to the fresh air. Against the wall stood a small furnace of fire-brick, with a chimney which doubtless joined the one in the library. I scrutinized everything closely, and found the following :—

Five small steel crucibles ; two mortars ; about half a ton of lead in small bars ; a pair of rusty scales, a knife, a chisel, and a hammer ; some scraps of paper covered

with figures ; the bones of some animal, possibly devoured by the snake.

The room had doubtless been used for some definite purpose, but its contents suggested nothing in particular.

I called in Simson, and asked his opinion.

He was still shaking with terror, and his brain was a blank.

"How did it live? How did it live?" he kept on murmuring.

I explained to him that there was plenty of air, and that a snake will sleep for months without food.

"Have a look round," I said sharply, "on your hands and knees; in the hay, in the corners, in the débris. Shift everything!"

He obeyed, and I watched him listlessly, trying to find some explanation for the presence of the things we had already found.

Then suddenly he held up something small, and round, in his fingers. I took it from him, and examined it in the light. It was a tiny lump of yellow metal.

I weighed it thoughtfully in my palm, and then, catching hold of the crucibles, examined them one by one close to the lantern. In two of them there was a faint smear of yellow.

Then, like a flash of lightning the truth broke in upon me, and my brain reeled at the thought. Here in this little vault lay the secret of my uncle's wealth. The yellow bead was of gold, how obtained, how made, I knew not. I remembered Playle's story of the Far East. My whole being thrilled with a fierce joy.

"We'll go up-stairs, Simson," I said calmly, after a short pause. "I'm afraid we have not discovered anything that will give us a clue to Sir Gilbert's disappearance."

But I could not sleep that night, and the very darkness seemed to blaze with golden light. On the morrow I intended to dig up the yellow box from its grave of slime.

CHAPTER X

LOVE THAT IS DEARER THAN ALL

THE next afternoon about five o'clock I set out along the bank towards Standinghoe. I intended to call at Playle's house and see his niece, and then, on my return, try and recover the box, when it was dark and my movements could not be observed.

It was a glorious day, and there was not a cloud in the blue sky overhead. There was not a breath of wind, and all the wide stretch of marshland quivered in the heat. The tide was high, and the water, smooth as a lake, scarcely made a ripple against the bank. Far away it stretched to the horizon like a sheet of glass, yellowish where it lay over the flats, but deep blue in the open sea beyond. A few white and brown sails dotted its wide surface, and in the distance the smoke of a steamer hung like a film of black gauze.

My thoughts were divided between sweet visions of Mary Playle and dreams of boundless wealth, but, as I walked along in the sunlight, the former rose uppermost in my mind, and I could think of nothing but that fair rose-leaf of a face, crowned with its glorious aureole of copper hair.

My mind had been much occupied with business since my uncle's disappearance, but for all that I had found

time to pay frequent visits to Standinghoe, and had made no secret of my love and admiration. It was sufficient for Mary Playle to see the way in which I scowled at Jack Outen, who was also a constant visitor at the house. She knew well enough that I loved her, but she did not as yet know that my intentions were those of an honorable man. Even in my poverty I was far above her station in life, and Billy Playle himself regarded me with suspicion.

But I had resolved to tell her on this very day, and before I was even near to the realization of my dream of wealth.

"If she is going to take me," I said to myself, "it shall be as a poor man, and not as a millionaire." It would have been a fine thing for me to stoop to her from a great height, but finer still to know that she loved me for myself alone.

When I was within a mile of Standinghoe I saw a white figure coming along the bank towards me, and even in the distance I could tell well enough who it was. I stopped, and sitting down on the bank, lay hidden behind a tall mass of reeds. My heart beat faster, and I am sure that there was a red flush beneath the tan of my cheeks.

"She is coming—my love, my fate," I sang softly to myself, and I was as nervous as only a lad can be. Though even at that age I had had some experience of women, I had never fallen in love before, and the wonder of it all overwhelmed me with confusion.

At last I could hear her footsteps, as I think I should have heard them "had I lain for a century dead."

They brushed lightly through the grasses on the top of the bank, and there was the pleasant rustle of a print skirt. I raised myself on one elbow, yawned as though I had been asleep, and then started with well simulated surprise.

"Why, Mr. Drew," she cried, "whatever are you doing here?"

Her surprise was more genuine than my own, but maids are sly things, and as I think over the matter today in cold blood, I suspect that she was the better actor of the two. A man against the sky-line is plainly visible for miles. I rose to my feet, hat in hand, and bowed.

"A snake in the grass," I said with a laugh.

She held out her hand and blushed most prettily.

"I am in a great hurry," she murmured.

"So was I," I replied, "until I saw you. I was making for Standinghoe."

"On your hands and knees?" she queried; "and what urgent business took you to Standinghoe?"

"What generally takes me to Standinghoe?"

She was silent, and looked on the ground. I stood in front of her, and thought I had never seen anything more delightful than her blushes.

"I must not keep you," she said after a pause; "and I am really in a great hurry. I am going to get some eggs from the Lower Cant Farm."

"Are you afraid they'll go bad if you wait?" I asked, with a laugh. "But I'll come with you, if I may. I don't think I'll go on to Standinghoe."

My eyes were fixed on a small clump of hawthorn

bushes half a mile inland. They lay on the road to the Lower Cant Farm. There was a convenient gate in their midst—an ideal spot for the matter I had in hand. One cannot make love to a girl against the sky-line.

"You may come," she said shyly, "though I don't know what folks will say if they see us walking about together."

"I know what the men will say," I replied, as we turned and walked towards Trunions. "They will say, 'There goes the fair maid of Essex, and a fellow that's not fit to clean her boots.'"

"How humble we are this afternoon," she said, with a provoking little smile; "and what will the girls say?"

"I don't know the mind of a girl in these matters," I replied.

"I know what they'd say," she continued. "They'd say, 'Little cat,' and they'd say—I shan't tell you what else they'd say."

The conversation, half jesting and half earnest, had commenced on propitious lines, and by the time we had turned off from the bank, and reached the clump of hawthorn bushes, I had contrived to strike a more serious note.

"It is very hot," I said, as we came to the gate. "Shall we sit here in the shade for a bit?"

"I am really in a hurry," she replied. I mopped my face vigorously with my handkerchief and tried to look as though I were likely to faint from the excessive heat. My look of misery had the desired effect, and she leaned

her arms on the gate. Perhaps the fact that the gate was locked and she had to climb over it had something to do with this sudden acquiescence in my wishes. I stood very close to her and, placing one elbow on the top bar, looked earnestly at her beautiful face. She stared at the Lower Cant Farm, a quarter of a mile away, and one might almost have imagined that she was thinking about the eggs.

We neither of us spoke for quite a minute. Then I quietly placed my hand on one of hers. She did not withdraw her fingers and scarcely seemed to notice the action. But, as I tightened my clasp on the soft flesh, the color flared into her cheeks.

"You mustn't do that, Mr. Drew," she said hastily. "Let us go on to the farm." She made a faint effort to remove her hand, but I gripped it the more tightly.

"Please let go of my hand," she continued, but still without looking at me.

"Mary," I said softly, "I want to tell you something if you will listen to me."

"What is it?" she said faintly, though she knew very well what it was. I was silent. All the afternoon I had been stringing together sentences that would adequately express my feelings, fierce, tender sentences, unimpeachable in style and phrasing, sonorous, musical, and well balanced. I had pictured them streaming passionately from my lips in an overwhelming flood, each one by itself enough to break down the barrier of a maiden's pride. But now that matters had come to a point I could recall none of them. I was silent, and only the steady

pressure of my fingers expressed what I wished to say. Then I realized that I was making a fool of myself and rushed headlong into speech.

"Mary," I blurted out, "I love you, dear." She did not speak, but I could see her lithe form tremble as she turned her face away.

"Mary," I said softly, and then the words came, hot, quick, and passionate. I loosed her hand, and placing my arm round her waist, drew her close to me. She did not resist.

"What do you mean?" she murmured. "What do you mean? My folk are fishermen, and you ——"

"I mean that I want to marry you!" I cried hotly. "What else should I mean? I love you, and you are too good for me. I have little to offer you. I am a poor man. You are rich—in beauty, in sweetness, in all that men most desire. It is you who will stoop, not I. Mary, will you be my wife?"

She raised her hot face to mine, and I saw that her eyes were full of tears. Our lips met in a passionate kiss. I forgot everything save that this woman loved me. My uncle's disappearance, the yellow box, the vision of wealth, the strange happenings of the past month—all were thrust aside and forgotten. All the glory of heaven and earth were mine.

The sun had already set when I said good-night to Mary Playle a few hundred yards from Standinghoe. A few stars shone faintly in the east, but the west was a glory of pale green and rose-colored light. All round us lay the silence, glistening stretches of mud, expanse of

gray sea, and the marshland with its pools still glowing in the western light.

For the last hour we talked practical common sense, interrupted here and there by brief intervals of tender love. I told her of my golden dreams for the future, and built castles of gold that towered to the very skies, castles in which she was the princess, the priceless gem that would shine in a setting of fabulous wealth.

"I will see your uncle to-morrow," I said, as we parted. "We will be married as soon as possible, and then ——" I took her in my arms and covered her face with kisses. Her lips were cold and she trembled.

"What is it, dearest?" I asked.

"I don't know," she replied, bursting into tears. "I am afraid."

"Afraid of what?" I asked tenderly.

"I don't know," she whispered. "But this wealth. I would rather you did not seek it. We can be very happy on what you have. It seems such a lot to me. Sir Gilbert was right—believe me, he must have been right."

I laughed away her fears and kissed her again and again.

"Good-night, my darling," I said, "and whatever money I have I shall always be rich so long as you are my wife."

We parted, and I watched her as she walked along the bank towards Standinghoe. At last she turned, waved her hand, and disappeared behind a cottage.

I stood in the same place for a few minutes with my mind full of all the ecstasy of love. The darkening earth

and sky blazed with glory. Whatever happened, nothing could rob me of this.

I turned and walked homewards. The moon had now risen, and a thin path of silver light streamed across the sea. As I neared Trunions I stopped and drank in the peacefulness of the scene. Then something on the water caught my eye. A mere ripple on the glassy surface. I watched it and saw it move across the silver pathway like a dark line. It was more than a mile away, and it disappeared in the gray sea beyond the path of the moonlight.

I gave it no further thought, and, going into the house, ate a hearty meal and spent the evening in dreaming of my future happiness. I had resolved not to try and find the yellow box that night. I would not desecrate the day of love's triumph with anything so sordid as a search for wealth.

CHAPTER XI

THE RING

THE next morning I went over to Standinghoe, and had a long interview with Billy Playle. He consented to my marriage with his niece, though he commenced by telling me that he had never known any happiness come of such unequal unions. In the end, however, I overcame his scruples and arranged for the marriage to take place at the end of November.

That very day Jack Outen left the village and joined a ship bound for New Orleans. He had lost, poor fellow, and I could afford to pity him.

I spent the whole of that day with Mary Playle, but in the evening I resolved to search for the yellow box. I owed this much to the woman I loved, for at present I had little enough to offer her. In fact I now desired wealth more than ever. I longed to lay all the treasures of the earth at her feet, to crown her glorious head with priceless jewels, to hang ropes of pearls round her fair neck, to make her mistress of a palace, to force the whole world to envy her, to dazzle all England with her beauty and her magnificence.

I parted from her at 6 P. M., and after dinner I slipped quietly out of Trunions by a side entrance and made my way to the place where I had buried the yellow box. I took with me a spade and a long thin piece of bamboo

with a steel hook at the end of it. I had carefully corded the box before I had placed it in the mud, so as to afford some means of drawing it up to the surface again.

I passed out of the house without rousing the servants. A spell seemed to have fallen on Simson since his brief interview with the snake. He moved about like a man in a dream. He was white-faced, absent-minded, almost fey, as the Scotch would call it. The cook had already come to me in tears, explaining that she really could not get the dinner ready, for Mr. Simson's stories made her flesh creep. I had no doubt that both she and the housemaid sat open mouthed in the kitchen and swallowed all that Simson chose to tell them. As I left the house, I had no fear that any one would notice my departure.

The moon was shining brightly as I wended my way along the bank towards the stone "hard." The tide was out, and the broad expanse of mud looked dreary and desolate in the moonlight.

A very faint breeze sighed through the reeds and grasses. In the distance I could see the lights of Stand- inghoe, like a cluster of stars; far out to sea, a single light moving slowly northward, and behind me a faint glimmer from Trunions. All the rest of the land was in darkness.

When I reached the "hard," I walked carefully down its slippery surface, and searched for the marks I had made on the stones. With the aid of a few matches I found them, measured out the distance from the edge, and plunged my rod as far as it would go into the slime. It sank foot after foot, but encountered nothing. I tried

it again and again, but with no result. And all the while the cold moon glared down on me.

Then I laid the rod aside and commenced to dig with the spade, hurling up lump after lump of mud, first brown, and then black, as I worked below the surface. But fast though I worked the soft mud was too quick for me. Swiftly and silently it oozed back into the hole. I sweated in every pore, but I might as well have dug in the sea. Then I rested for a minute, and there was no hole at all, and nothing to mark where one had been, save a dark patch on the brown surface. I gave vent to an oath, and flung the spade far from me across the mud. It fell with a splash, glittered for a moment in the moonlight, and then sank out of sight.

I once more took up the bamboo stick, and as I did so, I saw something glitter in a spadeful of mud that I had flung up on the causeway. I picked it up, and saw that it was a ring, and, when I had wiped the mud off it, I gave a start, and it fell from my fingers and went tinkling on the causeway. I picked it up again, and examined it with horror. For I knew the ring well. It was one that my uncle always wore on the little finger of his left hand.

I stood there as though spellbound in the moonlight, and looked slowly round from marsh to mud, and from mud to sea, and from sea to marsh again. I half expected to see something that would explain the tragedy of Sir Gilbert's disappearance—something floating on the sea, some rag of clothing fluttering on the marsh, some limb half covered with the ooze. Was it possible, I asked myself, that my uncle had found out where I had hidden the

box, that he had tried to recover it, that he had slipped, and that he lay there deep below the surface. It was conceivable that all this had happened, and that the ring had been torn from his finger in the struggle for life. I remembered the night I had met him running, as though the devil were at his heels. The horror of the whole idea stupefied my brain. I stood motionless, seeing in my imagination all the details of a tragedy.

Then I roused myself. I resolved to have the mud searched on the following morning, but, before any one stirred it up to its lowest depths, I must find the yellow box, if it was still in the place where I had hidden it. I did not want any one else to know of its existence, or the story of its concealment. I did not care to answer Mr. Rosick's question, when he heard of its discovery. I seized the long pole and once more plunged it feverishly into the mud.

Then I recalled an article I had once read about the mud and sands of a coast-line, in which the writer expounded a theory that, though these substances were to all appearance stationary, they in reality shifted, and moved in their own slow way, more like a liquid than a solid. I extended the area of my search, and though I could not explore far from the causeway, I could move up and down it for some distance in either direction.

For half an hour I worked unceasingly, and the sweat poured off my body with the exertion of thrusting the pole into the mud and drawing it out again. There was a gruesome horror in the whole business, for at any moment I expected the hook at the end of the pole to catch

it something soft, and to bring it up with a shred of clothing at the end of it.

Then at last, about seven feet to the west of my two marks, the pole struck something hard five feet below the surface, and about three from the causeway. I pulled it up a little, thrust it down, moved it about, and raised and lowered it again and again. At last it caught in something, and I could not move it an inch.

My heart beat fast with excitement. I had secured something, but I was now confronted with the difficulty of bringing it to the surface. The mud, which was soft enough to a thin pole thrust straight down into it, was solid enough to resist the pull of an object that presented any surface of resistance. I had been fool enough to throw away my spade in a fit of anger, and I saw nothing for it but to return to Trunions and fetch another.

I tied a piece of string round the pole, and secured the other end to a small stake that had been driven in among the stones on the causeway. Then I hurried back to the house.

Before I left it again, the moon went in behind a bank of clouds, and I thought it best to take a lantern with me. I encountered Simson in the hall.

"Is that you, sir?" he said, with a white face.

"It is," I replied. "I am just going out to dig for a ring I dropped in the mud."

"Oh, I'm glad it's you, sir," he replied eagerly. "There's been some one moving about the house for the last hour. I went into the library, and, finding no one there, thought you were out, and I wondered who it was

moving—creeping softly, like a cat, sir, so to speak. I was a bit frightened, but I'm glad to find you've been in all the time."

"On the contrary," I said sharply, "I have only just come in. I'd have another look if I were you."

The man's knees shook, and he looked at me piteously.

"Won't you have a look round before you go, sir?" he said.

"You can do it," I replied; "you've got eyes. I expect it's only a cat. I shall be back in an hour." And I left him on the door-step looking the picture of abject terror.

It was now very dark, and I had to make my way carefully along the path. As I neared the causeway I heard something move in the thick reeds at the foot of the bank. I stopped and threw the light of my lantern on to the ground below. I saw nothing but a wide ditch of brown water fringed with rushes. They swayed gently in the wind. I laughed at my suspicions. I was really becoming as nervous as Simson.

Then suddenly there was a loud splash, and a few yards away the water of the ditch was stirred into tiny waves. I ran forward, and saw a man swimming, but, before I could get close enough to distinguish his face or general appearance, he had scrambled up on the opposite bank and disappeared in the darkness. I only had a fleeting vision of a tall form, dripping, and rather shapeless, and this vanished almost immediately in the night.

I called out, but no one answered. I heard, however,

the sound of a man running, and then another splash as though he had fallen into water.

"He'll have a pleasant journey across the marsh," I said to myself, and though I could not attach any importance to the incident, it left an unpleasant impression on my mind. I recalled what Simson had said about hearing some one in the house during my absence. And what should a man want in the marshes at this hour, and why should he fly like a criminal?

However, I had work to do and no time for idle conjectures. I climbed up the bank and, descending on the other side, made my way to the "hard."

I walked down it cautiously, lantern in hand, and keeping a careful eye on the stones under my feet, for I did not want to trip over the piece of string. But to my astonishment I found that the string had gone and I reached the end of the cause way without seeing any sign of it.

I retraced my steps and found the stake to which I had tied my pole, and then raising my lantern high over my head, looked out across the mud for some signs of the pole itself. It had completely disappeared. The surface of the mud was smooth and unbroken.

I gave a cry of rage and brought my spade down on the stones with a crash. Then a sudden fear came into my mind. It was evident that I had been watched, and that some one else was in search of the yellow box. Nay, it was even possible that during my absence this other person had secured the prize. Who was this man? Who shared the secret that my uncle had carried down with him into his grave?

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET OF THE BOX

I FLUNG myself into my task with feverish haste. I knew almost the exact spot where I had left the pole, for I had the stake to guide me. I set the lantern down on the stones and dug furiously, hurling out spadeful after spadeful of mud as far as I could cast it. But, as the hole grew deeper, I saw the futility of my labor. I could not reach down into it from the causeway, and it was impossible to tread on the treacherous surface. I might have succeeded with the aid of the pole, for it might have been possible to draw the box out when I had removed some of the mud from the top of it. But sheer digging was useless waste of time.

I paused and watched the mud flow back inch by inch till the hole had disappeared. Then I turned on my heel and walked home, gripping my spade firmly in my right hand. Every now and then I stopped and threw the light of the lantern on every side to see if I were being followed.

I reached home without further incident, and, after a brief interview with Simson, went to bed. I had resolved to let the box be brought to light in the search for my uncle's body. It would be easy to identify it as Sir Gilbert's property and take possession of it. If people chose to ask questions as to its contents—well, there

would be no need to tell the truth about it. As for Mr. Rosick—I should tell him just as much or as little as I pleased. So I argued as I went to sleep.

In the morning I made known my discovery of my uncle's ring, and by noon I had mustered twenty men and set them to work to search all the mud to the north and south of the causeway. With the aid of planks, ropes, buckets, shovels, and the encouragement of a few gallons of beer, they excavated nearly an acre, banking up the sides with boards. They found no body, nor any further trace of Sir Gilbert Drew, but they brought the yellow box to light and I claimed it at once as one of my uncle's possessions. I had the key in my pocket and resolved to open it before the police made any further investigations or enquiries.

That same night I took the box from the safe in which I had placed it and laid it on the desk in the library. Then I locked the door, saw that all the blinds were close drawn, and sat down in the chair before the thing that held, as I firmly believed, the secret of my uncle's wealth and also of my uncle's death.

It was some time before I could make up my mind to open it. I sat there with the key in my hand and idly examined the chasing on the metal work. This small yellow cube before me meant so much that I scarcely dared to pry into its contents. My uncle's words stood out before my eyes as though written in letters of fire, words set forth in a man's will—his last message, "I beseech my nephew to destroy the same or else cast it into the sea, where no man can ever set eyes on it again. I

implore him to do this for his own happiness and for the peace of my own soul."

It was a solemn charge, and for a while I hesitated to disobey it. He had repeated it with his own lips and I had done his bidding. Yet here was the box lying on the table before me, and within it lay perhaps two secrets. And there, in the silence, I persuaded myself that it was my duty to unravel the mystery of my uncle's death. But all the while a vision floated before my eyes of a glorious face crowned with diamonds, and a fair white neck wreathed with pearls. In my heart of hearts I knew what I wished to find in the box—the secret of great riches.

Then suddenly with set lips and trembling hands I thrust the key in the lock, turned it, and flung back the lid.

The box was full to the brim with a coarse yellow powder. I took a little of it in my fingers and examined it. It was sawdust, such as one can gather from a saw-pit. Then I laid a newspaper on the desk and tilted the box so that the powder poured out from it in a tiny yellow stream. When the box was half empty a small circular patch of green appeared on the surface. I touched it gently with one of my fingers and then, thrusting my hand down the side of it, drew out a small heavy globe, which I placed on the table in front of me. It was about three inches in diameter, perfectly smooth, and made apparently of some greenish colored metal.

When I had examined it carefully I turned out the rest of the sawdust and sifted it carefully in case there might

be anything else in the box. But I discovered nothing further, and the small globe represented the entire contents. I must confess that I was disappointed. I had half expected to discover some rare and priceless jewel or some clue to a hidden treasure. But there was nothing but a little ball with a smooth polished surface that afforded no clue whatever to either the secret of my uncle's wealth or my uncle's death. It was distinctly dull and uninteresting.

I lit my pipe and gazed at it thoughtfully. Without doubt this little sphere contained some secret, and was in itself of great value and importance. It had exercised in the past some terrible and far-reaching effect on my uncle's life. He had bidden me cast it far from me, as though it had been an accursed thing. He had called out to me to restore it to him. Perhaps even the fervor of religion had been aroused by the fear of some terrible power that this small globe had obtained over his mind and character. Yet, whatever was its secret, it held it fast. It was solid, smooth, and not a line marked its surface. It was inscrutable, silent as the grave. I might as well have left it in the mud.

I took it off the table, tossed it two or three times in the air, and caught it again, and then placed it in my pocket. I then sat down in an easy chair and tried to forget all about it by losing myself in the mazy intricacies of a new novel.

I smoked and read for over an hour, and then rose with a yawn, which ended suddenly in a screech of pain. Something had apparently stung my thigh. I plunged

my hand into my pocket and withdrew it with a yell. The globe was as hot as boiling water. While I had been sitting in the chair it had not touched any part of my body. But directly I had risen it had fallen against my thigh. I took off my coat and flung it to the floor. The globe fell out of the pocket and rolled across the carpet. I went down on my knees and examined it. To my surprise I noticed that it was no longer green, but of a dull purple color, and that it was covered with yellow characters like Chinese or Japanese letters.

In an instant I forgot my pain. My heart beat wildly with excitement.

The globe had spoken at last, and though at present its message was meaningless, there were doubtless plenty of oriental scholars in England who would decipher it for me.

I at once resolved to carefully copy the characters on paper, arrange them in their exact order, cut the paper into a number of slips, and have each slip deciphered by a different man. This method of procedure would to some extent preserve my secret, a most necessary precaution, if the secret was of any importance.

I placed a lamp on the floor beside the globe, and lying full length on the carpet, commenced my task. It was a long one, for I realized the necessity of accuracy in copying unknown characters, where every dot and doubtless the length of every line was of vital importance.

Before I had half completed the job, the writing on the globe began to fade, and in a few minutes the surface had changed to its original greenish hue.



It was covered with yellow characters like Chinese or Japanese letters.

I rose to my feet with an oath, and realized that I must discover the cause of the original transformation. I hastily ran my mind over everything that I had done since I first opened the box, and tried a repetition of every action. I touched the sphere, which was now cold, with my fingers. I held it in the warm clasp of my hand. I tossed it in the air several times and caught it again. But it still remained a smooth, cold globe of green metal.

Then I felt in my pocket and drew out the few odds and ends that a man often carries in an old coat—a stump of pencil, a knife, a small piece of tarred twine, three coppers, an old pipe, a gold pencil, and a cartridge for a 22-bore rook rifle. I touched the disc with each of these in turn, with the steel and ivory of the knife, with the wood and vulcanite of the pipe, with the coppers, and so on; but nothing happened till I tried the gold pencil. After I had held the narrow little tube to the green surface for a minute, I felt it grow warm in my fingers, and the green of the globe darkened.

I dropped the pencil, and, taking a sovereign from my pocket, I placed it on the floor, and set the globe on the top of it. In a few minutes the color of the globe had changed to a deep purple, and the letters once more stood clearly out on its surface. I had at any rate discovered one secret. Gold was the metal that had worked this extraordinary change.

I once more set to work to copy the inscription, and for two hours I never left my task. I completed it at one o'clock in the morning, knocked the globe off the coin, and at once started to make a second copy from the one

I had originally made. I did this with a piece of tracing paper, but it took me over an hour.

I then picked up the globe, which was now cold, and had assumed its greenish tint again, and placed it, together with the two pieces of paper, in the safe, which I locked.

I then bethought me of Rosick and the police. I carefully poured back all the sawdust into the box, locked it, and threw the key into the mud outside the window. I was determined that Rosick himself should open the box and see that there was nothing inside it.

The next morning I wired for him, and he came down in the afternoon. I told him all about the ring, and showed him the box.

"We found nothing in the mud," I said, quietly, "but this. I thought perhaps that we should come across my uncle's body."

"Why did you think so?" Rosick asked abruptly.

I saw that I had made a slip. My remark had been founded on the idea that my uncle had been to look for the yellow box, and was prompted by my knowledge that the yellow box was there. I was as yet untrained in the art of deceit, and the detective's cold, keen eyes seemed to pierce into my brain.

But I had plenty of self-possession for one so young, and I smiled.

"We found his ring," I replied steadily. "He always wore it. And then, when we found the box——"

"Oh, I see," said Rosick, "it was *after* you found the box that you thought you would find the body."

"Of course," I replied, and knew that I had scored a point. "Knowing the importance that my uncle attached to this box, I thought it quite possible that he had thrown it away, and had then changed his mind and returned to dig it up again. It was possible for him to have slipped off the causeway and have been stifled in the mud. The ring might have come off in the struggle for life. That was my theory—quite a possible one."

"Quite," Mr. Rosick replied. "I don't wish to be impertinent, Mr. Drew, but I should like to know what first took you to the causeway at that time of night."

"I don't quite see what that has to do with the matter," I replied, "but if it will in any way satisfy your curiosity I will tell you. I went there with no definite object in view, but merely for a stroll after dinner. I might just as well have gone anywhere else."

Mr. Rosick laughed.

"Good fortune took you to the spot," he said pleasantly; "you'd make a good detective. But now let us open the box."

I rang the bell, sent for a chisel and hammer, and assumed an excitement that I certainly did not feel. Mr. Rosick himself opened the box, and poured its contents carefully into a newspaper on the floor. He sifted the sawdust slowly with his fingers, and then poured it all back into the box.

"A hoax," he said with a smile. "The virtue may be in the box itself. Yet you will notice that there is not enough sawdust to fill the box. Probably there was once something else in it. Let me think."

He walked up and down the room frowning, with his arms behind his back, as was his custom when deep in thought. Then he suddenly stopped, and, picking up something off the writing table, examined it closely.

"What have you found?" I said.

He held out his hand and I saw a few grains of sawdust on the tip of his forefinger.

"How did that get on the writing table?" he asked, as though talking to himself. "Eight feet away, three feet above the floor."

I was silent. Then suddenly he looked hard into my eyes.

"Some one has already opened the box," he said slowly, "with a key. No wonder it is empty. I'm afraid, Mr. Drew, that I must decline to go on with the case. I wish you good-day."

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT I SAW AT THE WINDOW

I FELT by no means comfortable at the manner of Rosick's departure. It was clear that he suspected me of having opened the box, and it was even possible that my deception might give rise to still graver suspicions. He would at once ask himself what motive I had for concealment and connect my conduct in some way with my uncle's mysterious disappearance. I had behaved rather foolishly in this matter of the box, but for all that I was actuated by a very definite motive. I had no wish for what might turn out to be a valuable secret to become public property, and if once the box were brought into the case I knew that all secrecy would be at an end. Yet before I went to bed that night I had half made up my mind to make a clean breast of the whole affair.

But the next morning as I dressed and saw the sunlight sparkling on the sea, all my fears vanished and I thought of nothing but Mary Playle and the riches I would lay at her feet.

After breakfast I went up to London and spent the whole day in ascertaining the addresses of half a dozen Chinese scholars and calling on them with my little slips of paper. I gave a piece to each one and explained that I had copied it off the base of a Cloisonné vase, that possibly I had not done the job quite accurately, but that

I wished for an approximate translation of each symbol. I made them an offer of five guineas apiece for their work, but stipulated that the English must be written directly underneath its Chinese equivalent, so that I could tell the meaning of each separate sign.

During the next week I was much occupied with a voluminous correspondence with the six Chinese scholars. There was a difficulty about many of the symbols and I had to constantly refer to the globe and re-copy them with painful accuracy. Then, finally, when each translator had been satisfied as to the details, I received letters stating that the translations were complete but that they read like absolute rubbish.

I laughed when I got these letters. It was scarcely strange that the translators could make no sense out of the fragmentary pieces I had given them. I wrote back to each one of them, enclosing their fee, expressing disappointment at the result, but requesting them to forward the translations by return of post.

Three of them complied promptly with my request, the other three more or less at their leisure. One, apparently loth to let so poor a specimen of his skill go forth to the world, did not reply for a week. I sent him a couple of telegrams, the second one threatening a prosecution. At last the letter came and I tore it open feverishly. It contained nothing but a few lines expressing the writer's regret at having mislaid both the original and the translation, and requesting me to forward him another copy of the inscription.

I cursed savagely at the delay and spent six weary

hours with the globe and the other pieces before me, so as to be sure of sending the right set of characters. Then I wrote an abusive letter to the man and asked for an immediate reply.

It came by return of post. He sent back my check and slip of paper and a short note which showed that he had taken offense at my language. I set my teeth as I read it. It almost seemed as though some unseen power was throwing every obstacle in my path. And some voice even whispered to me at that time that I had better turn back before it was too late, and that the road I had marked out for myself would lead only to dishonor and death.

But so set was my purpose, and so firm the fiery resolution of youth, that I believe the appearance of an angel with a flaming sword would scarce have turned me back from the golden road I saw before me. That very evening I was up in town and had found another man to do the work.

The five translations already to hand had given me some idea of the value of the secret which my uncle had wished to lie buried forever in the ooze of the marshes. It appeared to be nothing less than a formula for the transmutation of baser metals into gold, a secret which has baffled the scientists of all time. The details were lacking, but I had no doubt when the translation was complete that everything would be made clear to me.

I awaited this last letter with feverish anxiety, and scarcely slept for two nights. Then it came and there was more delay, a repetition of the questions asked by

the other translators. I might have expected as much, but my patience was exhausted and I broke into a string of blasphemous oaths and, shaking my fist in fury, cried out that the devil himself should not turn me from my purpose. Already, even at this early stage of the proceedings, the lust of gold was shaking the true balance of my mind.

But for all that I answered the man soberly and distinctly. I had profited by my previous experience. And two days later I was rewarded by receiving a letter which formed the last link in the golden chain.

That same evening I sat in the library with the full translation before me. It set forth in flowery language how all things are possible to those who obey, and how Kiao Lung (whoever he might be) was Lord of all the earth and the metals thereof, and how gold was of no account in his sight, and how his wings brushed the stars, and the sun was a jewel on his forefinger, and so on, and so on, in all the wild extravagance of Oriental imagery.

It then proceeded to state that at one period all metals were similar, and that only time had altered their outward appearance. That they were known to us only through their attributes, but that the substance had remained the same, and that it was in the power of a true believer to alter the "attributes," or those characteristics by which the substance is made known to us through the five senses.

It then went on to the practical part. The details were most simple and seemed to depend for their success chiefly on the possession of the green globe. One metal could only be changed into another that was higher in

the scale of specific gravity. Thus iron could be changed into lead and lead into gold, but lead could not be changed into iron. The metal to be transmuted had to be melted and the globe placed in it. The result was merely a question of the time the globe was allowed to remain in the molten liquid. A scale of the time separating the different metals was given.

The whole process seemed extraordinarily simple, having regard to the stupendous result. It was not even wildly improbable. It is true that an ordinary man would laugh at the whole business as a silly hoax, but it was impossible for me to view it otherwise than as a serious fact. Here was the explanation of my uncle's enormous wealth, of the hidden laboratory, of the gold strewn all over the house in magnificent profusion. He had been manufacturing gold and could afford to have his door handles made of it.

And, as I sat there with the secret of unbounded wealth laid bare before me, I saw visions of power and splendor that eclipsed the wildest inventions of Scheherazade. The whole earth and sky blazed with gems and gold. I stood towering above my fellow men like some giant, and they crouched at my feet. Wealth rules the world, and I could have more wealth than all the nations of Europe put together. It was mine for the asking. I saw myself as the ruler of men, a power illimitable. At my bidding wars should start or cease. Kings and cabinets should lie in the hollow of my hand. Only one voice should command me—the voice of Mary Playle.

Then suddenly my golden dreams were interrupted by

a faint sound—the distant barking of dogs. I rose abruptly from my seat and went to the window. It was a still night and a high spring tide splashed gently against the wall of the house. Far overhead went the yelping of a pack in full cry. I remembered the last time I had heard them and my uncle's words on that occasion.

"Gabriel's hounds," he had said, "they are hunting a soul to-night."

I shuddered and closed the window with a crash. The idle superstition had been justified in my uncle's case. The barnacle geese had brought death and disaster with them from the sea. It was possibly a mere coincidence, but the fact remained. They had been the harbingers of evil.

I returned to my chair, folded up the paper on my desk, and relapsed into an unpleasant train of thought. The golden visions had faded, and in their place rose the gray shadow of my uncle's disappearance. This secret had been his as well as mine. He could have been the richest man in the world. And yet he had actually reduced himself to poverty, had told me to hide the yellow box where he could not find it, had prayed aloud to God to save him, and then had disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up. I asked myself what other secret was bound up in this simple formula for obtaining wealth, and what price a man might have to pay for the possession of all the riches of the world.

I sat in my armchair till the lamp began to burn low. Then I was roused from my reverie by a timid knock on the door.

"Come in," I said sharply, and Simson entered. His face was white, and there were dark rings under his eyes. He closed the door behind him, and stood before me in an attitude of abject humility.

"Well, Simson," I said, "what is it?"

"If you please, sir," he began, and then stopped, as though afraid to continue the sentence.

"Well, well," I exclaimed angrily.

"I want to tell you, sir," he faltered, "that I'm afraid I must leave you, sir. I can't stand it any longer, sir, I can't sleep."

"How's that?" I asked.

"I don't know, sir. It seems to me as though there's always something in the 'ouse, always something in my room, something moving. I hear it all night, sir; sometimes it's footsteps, and then it's the creak of a door, and then it's a scraping sound, or a click. I can't sleep for listening; I can't, indeed, sir, and it's wearing me out. And I can't help thinking of that 'orrid snake, sir. It seems to be a wriggling and a twining of itself round me. I can't breathe. It hurts me right here, sir, on the chest. It's awful. I can't bear it, indeed I can't."

"Nonsense, Simson," I said severely. "You're a bit upset, run down. Go away for a fortnight's holiday, and then come back. This business about my uncle has affected your nerves. You want a change."

"I'd never come back, sir," he replied. "I'd die if I stayed here, and there's poor Sir Gilbert. I can sometimes hear him a crying and a crying, as though he were under my bed, like. It's awful, sir."

"Pshaw!" I said impatiently, "and as for the noises in the house, well, you're strung up, and they're probably due to rats, and the wind, or else ——"

I suddenly remembered that the library had been ransacked on the night of my uncle's disappearance, and that a few days after Simson had heard some one moving about the house. I also recalled the man I had seen on the night I had found my uncle's ring. It was more than possible that some one was searching the house, and that they were in search of the yellow box and its priceless contents. I glanced uneasily at the safe. It was strong, and would defy a good many efforts to force it open. Yet, given the necessary time, a modern burglar could accomplish almost anything.

"There is perhaps something in what you say, Simson," I said after a pause. "It is possible that there are burglars in the house. I wonder you did not tell me before."

"If I'd thought it was anything human, sir," he replied, "I'd have spoken. But I knew it weren't, and I don't like being laughed at, even by you, sir. But it's come to a head now, sir. I must go. I can't stand it."

"Well, I'm sorry, Simson," I said gravely, "but I think, if you will wait a few days, we shall find out the cause of all this disturbance. I sleep so soundly myself, I don't hear it. But we'll watch in future. You wouldn't be afraid to sit up here if you were armed, would you?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly like it, sir," he replied, "but if I had a revolver, I wouldn't be exactly afraid."

"It's like this, Simson," I continued. "In that safe is something of enormous value. From what you say, and from what I have observed myself, I have every reason to believe that attempts are being made to steal it. To-morrow I intend to employ a man to stay here all night in the room, but to-night you and I must watch it. It is now midnight. I will go to bed and sleep till four o'clock. You will sit up here. You must wake me up at four o'clock, and you can then go to bed and stay there till lunch if you like, or, if you prefer it, you can go to bed now and I'll wake you at four o'clock."

"I couldn't sleep, sir," he replied, "and I don't know that I wouldn't feel safer here with a light, and all that. I'll sit up now and wake you at four o'clock, sir."

"Very well," I said, cheerfully. "Here is a loaded revolver, and mind you don't shoot yourself. Here is a bottle of whiskey and a box of cigars. Don't drink too much. The lamp wants filling, and you'd better do it at once."

He left the room with the lamp, and I was alone in the darkness.

The moon had now risen above the sea, but it was fringed with clouds, and the window only showed up as a patch of pearl gray against the surrounding blackness. I heard Simson's heavy footsteps die away down the corridor, and then there was almost complete silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the splash of the sea against the wall outside. It was now just about high tide, and as I sat there in the darkness my uncle's strange words came back to me:

"When the tide comes in, then too will come the danger, riding on the crest of the waves, close to the very walls."

The words were meaningless, but they echoed in my ears, and there in the gloom, and with the sound of the little waves beating against the stone, they seemed to have acquired a force and emphasis that I could not account for.

Then suddenly I started to my feet and gripped my revolver. Something was moving along the ledge of the window sill, something that looked like a head—broad and flat like the skull of some degenerate race. I could see its shape clearly against the background of light gray. It moved in odd little jerks and starts.

Then all at once it rose up on a long thin neck, and reached almost to the centre of the window. I could see the neck swaying and bending against the sky, lithe as a whip.

I sprang forward to the window, but, before I reached it, the apparition had vanished. I flung up the sash and looked out, ready to discharge my revolver at anything I might see. I saw nothing save a surge of foam against the wall, and the spray of a great wave leaped up, and splashed my face. It was too dark to see clearly, but two minutes afterwards I thought I saw a swirl in the sea a quarter of a mile away.

Then Simson entered with the lamp. I closed the window, and laid the revolver on the desk. He looked at me enquiringly.

"A nice cool night, Simson," I said quietly. "I've just

been having a look out to see if there is anything about. But I see nothing of our expected visitor."

A look of relief crossed his face. I handed him the revolver and went up to bed. I said nothing of what I had seen, for I knew that, if I had told him the truth, no power on earth would have induced him to stay in the room alone. For I had seen the head and neck of a huge serpent, and I had an idea that the thing I had slain had come to life again.

CHAPTER XIV

A MIDNIGHT VIGIL

IN spite of the numerous thoughts I had to occupy my brain, I fell asleep very shortly after I got into bed. I was tired out, and the excitement of the past few days had wearied both my body and brain.

I am, as a rule, a sound sleeper, and did not expect to wake till Simson roused me. I was therefore surprised when I opened my eyes and found no one in the room.

"Simson," I called out, thinking perhaps that I could not see him in the dim gray light. But there was no reply, and with a sigh of relief I turned over for another spell of sleep. Then I thought I would look at my watch and see how much longer I could have in my comfortable bed.

I struck a match and saw to my astonishment that it was half-past four. I at once sprang out of bed and slipped on a Norfolk jacket and a pair of flannels. Simson had evidently fallen asleep at the post of duty, for it was quite certain that he would not sit up a second after four o'clock to give me a longer night's rest. I lit a candle and made my way down-stairs to the library.

I opened the door and saw that the lamp was still burning and that Simson was in a big chair with his back to me. I could see one arm hanging down limply, and

his fingers just touching the butt of the revolver which lay on the floor. I went up to him and shook him violently from behind. His head waggled on his shoulders, but he did not wake.

"Simson," I cried out, "wake up."

Then I went round and faced him, and, as I loosed his shoulders, the body fell heavily to one side. I caught him by the chin and looked into his face. It was white as a sheet, bloodless, and his eyes were wide open and staring. I saw at a glance that he was dead, and that his whole face was frozen into a terrible expression of terror. It was like a white mask of wax moulded by some sculptor to represent human fear.

I poured some spirit between his lips and placed my hand over his heart. There was no movement and he was undoubtedly dead. I propped him up and found that his body had already begun to stiffen.

I then turned my attention to the room. There were no signs of a struggle, but on the other hand there was evidence of some one having searched it pretty thoroughly. The window was open, and I knew well enough that I had left it shut. The carpet underneath the sill was wet.

There were no marks of violence on Simson's body, and it appeared as though he had died a natural death. I thought, however, that it would be as well to summon a doctor. There were only womenfolk in the house now, and I should have to go to the nearest farm to get assistance. I had sold the horses and dismissed the groom and coachman a month previously.

I went up-stairs, dressed, and ran off to the Lower

Cant Farm, where I got a man to ride into Sneathing for Dr. Wilson. I then returned to the house and kept my lonely vigil with the dead.

For two hours I waited in the library. The darkness changed to gray and the gray to palest gold, and then the east was flooded with crimson light. I sat there motionless, revolver in hand, and with fear gripping my heart. An indefinable atmosphere of terror seemed to pervade the whole place. I could not stand the look in Simson's eyes, and I covered his face with a handkerchief. And all the time I puzzled my brain to think what it was that the dead man had seen, and who had visited the room in the silence of the night. But I feared that another strand had been woven in the mysterious web of circumstances connected with the yellow box and its contents.

Then the doctor came, and his arrival did much to dispel the gloom that was fast settling down on my brain. He examined poor Simson's body and turned to me with a grave face.

"Syncope," he said briefly. "I was afraid of it."

"Afraid of it?" I queried.

"Yes," he replied. "The poor chap came to me about a week ago and complained of sleeplessness and hearing strange noises in the night. I examined him and found that he was a bundle of nerves, and that he had a weak heart."

"Then it's a natural death?" I asked.

"In a sense, yes," replied Dr. Wilson; "but there must have been some cause. He might have lived for

years, but a sudden shock, mental or physical, would probably snuff him out like a candle. I told him to be careful. What was he doing in this room in the middle of the night?"

I explained. I said that I had valuable jewels in the safe and that I had reason to believe that some attempts had been made to steal them.

"And you think some one has been here to-night?" he asked, when I had told all I intended him to know.

"Yes," I replied. "I am certain of it. The window was open and there are evidences of the room having been searched. But the mere sight of a burglar would hardly have been a shock to Simson. In the first place, he was sitting up with the idea of seeing one, and he was armed."

"And, besides," added the doctor, "a burglar would hardly be likely to enter a well-lighted room occupied by a man with a revolver. And there are no signs of violence on the body. The shock must have been mental."

"My theory is this, doctor," I said. "Simson saw some one at the window and the shock killed him. The man then entered the room and searched it. There would be no need for any violence."

"Quite so," he replied, "and it is even possible that the man's imagination played him a trick. He has been strung up of late. An ordinary thief seen on the other side of the glass against the darkness may have been distorted by his brain into something loathsome and horrible."

"Just so," I replied, without looking into his face. I

could have guessed well enough what it was that Simson had seen, if it had not been for the open window and the signs of some one having searched the room. I declined to believe that a snake could open window catches and unlock drawers.

Before the doctor left I asked him to send over a policeman from Sneathing. I was determined to get at the bottom of these midnight visits, and was sorry I had not been more open with Rosick, who was a really clever man. I determined, however, to put a stop to them in the future, and had every intention of having the house guarded night and day. It was intolerable that a country house in Essex should be at the mercy of every rogue who wished to enter it. And, if ever I became wealthy, I resolved to make Trunions as inaccessible as a fortress manned with troops.

After breakfast I made a thorough examination of the ground outside the library window. The tide had receded from the shore, and, putting on a pair of sea boots, I waded in the mud knee deep along the foot of the wall. I discovered further signs of some one having entered the window, a few white scratches on the gray stone, a small piece of brown cloth hanging on the rusty nail, and a few blood stains on the window sill. The man had probably scratched his hand in clambering up the rough stone. I placed the piece of cloth in my pocket. It was barely an inch square, but the pattern of it seemed familiar to me.

I then went back to the house and explored the cellar. I found nothing there of any importance, though I fancied there were several damp marks on the stone, as though

some one had walked across the floor with wet feet and the moisture had not yet had time to dry. But these marks were very faint and indefinite.

I then returned to the library. Poor Simson's body had been taken up-stairs, but I could not help thinking of his face. Then an idea struck me. I pulled the piece of cloth out of my pocket and rang the bell. The housemaid entered, white faced and trembling. She looked nervously round as though she expected to see something.

"Jane," I said, holding out the piece of cloth, "have you ever seen any suit of that pattern?" She took it in her hand rather as though she thought it would bite her.

"Yes, sir," she replied, holding it close to her eyes, "Sir Gilbert had one the very same as this last year. He wore it out and I think it's up-stairs now."

"Go up and find it," I said sharply. The girl left the room, but she could not find the suit. And for a whole hour I sat and looked at the little piece of cloth and wondered how on earth it had got on to that nail in the wall.

CHAPTER XV

GOLD ! GOLD ! GOLD !

Two days after poor Simson was buried I called at Standinghoe for Mary Playle, and we walked inland along the bank at the edge of the creek. I had not seen her for over a week, for I had not left Trunions since the night when I translated the secret of the globe and the butler was found dead in the library. I had last parted from her in high hopes of attaining the desire of my heart. I now had to tell her that I had achieved success. For the night previously I had turned a couple of pounds of buckshot into a small block of solid gold and had tested the truth of the formula that had fallen into my hands.

We had much to talk about as we wandered along the bank that ran between the creek and the lonely marshland. We had few secrets from each other in those days, and my dear sweetheart knew most of the story of the yellow box. I had pledged her to secrecy and I think she enjoyed the idea of knowing that which had been carefully concealed from every one else. It showed the confidence I placed in her and also, I fear, flattered her woman's vanity. For no healthy girl is superior to small feminine weaknesses.

I told her of my success and her eyes sparkled with delight as I drew the small lump of gold from my pocket and placed it in her tiny hand.

"Oh, how heavy it is," she cried, "and such a little piece of it." She threw it up in the air and I caught it, placed it back in my pocket, and kissed her.

"Worth £90, that bit," I said, "and you, darling, are worth all the gold in the world," and I kissed her again and again.

"And what is this?" she asked laying her hand on a heavy lump in my other pocket. "Is it another piece of gold?" I did not answer. She slipped her hand into the pocket and drew out a revolver. She replaced it and I saw a look of uneasiness cross her face.

"What is that for?" she asked nervously.

"To guard the gold," I replied, trying to make a jest of it.

"What are you afraid of?" she insisted. I did not answer. Then I framed a lie.

"They are a rough lot about here," I said, looking across at Standinghoe, "and if it were known that I had a lot of gold ——" I stopped, and I think a look of fear must have come into my face.

"Be frank with me, dear," she pleaded. "You have told me all the bright side of the matter. I am not afraid to look on the dark side of it."

"Why bother your dear head about such things," I said gaily. "I don't want to worry you. There are always disadvantages attached to great wealth, and this is one of them."

"But who should want to kill you?" she asked, and I saw tears coming into her eyes.

"Sit down here," I said, pointing to a smooth, soft

patch of grass on the edge of the bank, "and I will tell you all I know about it, though I would rather not do so."

We sat down side by side and I told her everything. I told her of the visits of some unknown person to the house, of the snake in the cellar, of the snake I thought I had seen on the night of the wreck, and also on the night of Simson's death. I told her of the look of terror on Simson's face. I spared her nothing and, even as I told the story, I glanced behind me from time to time as though expecting to see something emerge from the thick bed of tall reeds at the foot of the bank behind us. Then, when I had finished, I took one of her hands in mine and looked earnestly into her face.

"I have told you all this, dearest," I said, "not merely to gratify your wish, but in order to impress upon you the necessity for being careful where you go when you are by yourself. You may remember that more than a month ago I asked you never to go far from the village by yourself. I think I gave you some reason which was not the true one. Now you will see that there is danger abroad. Whence it comes I don't know. But it lurks in this neighborhood, either in the marshes or the sea. Danger from man and beast, mark you. For God's sake, dearest, be careful. I would not have them take from me what is the dearest treasure in all the world."

For answer she threw her arms round my neck and held me close to her.

"I am frightened," she said. "What does it all mean?" I kissed her and laughed.

"Don't be frightened, Mary," I said. "Only be careful. Very soon I shall have you for my own, and you will be as safe in Trunions as in Kronstadt. When I am rich I intend to make it as impregnable as a fortress."

"I am frightened," she whispered. "What does it all mean? I wish you hadn't told me."

"It simply means," I replied, "that some one wants to discover the secret of the yellow box. It would be a stupendous theft, a robbery of more wealth than there is in the whole world."

"Yet who knows of it?" she asked, and indeed I could not answer her. We were both silent for a little while, and I saw her scan the waste of marshes and the inscrutable surface of the sea as though to find some answer to her question. Then she suddenly flung her arms round my neck and clung to me.

"Give it up," she whispered. "Cast it back into the mud. We can be quite happy, you and I, without riches, oh, so happy. And we shall be safe. No one will trouble about us. Give it up, darling; give it all up, I implore you!"

I reasoned with her gently, and after a time succeeded in calming her sudden paroxysm of fear. I painted the future in the most glowing language at my command and opened out so gorgeous a vista of wealth that the color came once more to her cheek and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm.

"We shall be the richest people in the world," I cried out, "and with all our lives before us. Most people do not become rich till youth has passed. But we shall start

life with the greatest fortune ever known in the history of mankind. We shall be young, happy in our love, and with all England at our feet. Nothing will be impossible for us. We shall be all powerful. We can purchase whatever we desire. We shall be able to banish poverty, and finance the whole nation. As for our personal wants, land, houses, jewels, why, we can buy all that is in the market. You shall be queen of all the earth, and I master of all men, but—your slave.”

“My mind cannot grasp it,” she said faintly. “There is something terrible about such power. It cannot be right. It seems against the laws of nature.”

“Nature is moulded by man,” I replied. “See here, look at this bank. Nature intended the waters of this creek to overflow the marshland at high tide. But man has built this bank and driven back the waters, and cattle feed on the land.”

“Yet sometimes the wind and the waves are too strong,” she said solemnly, “and the bank breaks and the waters pour over the land again.” I rose to my feet laughing, and held out my hand.

“We must return,” I said, “the sun is getting low and I do not care to be out after dark.” She took my hand and I helped her to her feet. And as we walked home we talked of our love and all the happiness that the future would bring to us.

We parted a few hundred yards before the village commenced. Under the shelter of a high bank crowned with a few small bushes I took her in my arms and kissed her passionately.

"Good-night, dearest," I whispered. "Don't be afraid, but be careful. In a few weeks nothing shall harm you. Till then be careful, and don't go far by yourself. You and I together need not be afraid of anything. See there," and I pointed to the sunset in the west. The whole sky was a sheet of gold, save for a long dark cloud that was poised over the sun, and that was fringed with brilliant light. High up in the heavens floated a few white islands bordered with rose colored foam. The long wide creek wound glittering among the green marshes, and even these were flecked with pools of gold.

"Gold in the sky," I cried, "and gold in the water! Gold everywhere! Gold! Gold!! Gold!!!"

We parted, and I walked back to Trunions alone. And, before I had gone a quarter of a mile, the dark cloud swooped down on the sun and the gold died from the water and the marshland. I stopped, and it seemed to me that the cloud had assumed the form of a giant hand, grasping all the golden light behind it in its sable fingers.

"Perchance," I said to myself, as I hurried homewards, "that is the shadow of the hand of God."

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOLD FEVER

DURING the next month I made more than a million pounds sterling, and succeeded in turning out five hundred-weight of gold a day. But with the appliances at my disposal I had to work from morning to night to do this.

I had already enlarged the furnace in the cellar, but it was even now scarcely big enough for my requirements. From breakfast time to lunch, and from lunch to dinner I hid myself from the fresh air and light, and stood half naked before the crucible of molten metal. At times I even forgot my meals and labored far into the night. All my thoughts and energies were concentrated on the pile of small yellow bars, which were accumulating in the corner of the room.

I had to exercise considerable ingenuity in disposing of them. I shipped them to the Continent and reshipped them to England. They were addressed to my name, care of the Bank of England. I had opened an account there, and I took a day off for the purpose of interviewing the Bank on the question of converting the bullion into coin. I explained that I was the fortunate possessor of an alluvial mine in South America, and that I was simply turning out gold by the ton. The official shrugged his shoulders and asked no questions. He told me that the Bank were bound to take all gold offered to it, and

that they were not concerned with its origin. So long as it passed the assayers, and was honorably come by, it would be converted into sovereigns, and the value placed to my credit, or else handed to me in notes. I was considerably relieved to hear this, but I told the man that I might have to ask him to take a considerable quantity.

"Send it along," he said with a grim smile. "We can do with all the gold in the world," and he explained to me that gold was the life blood of a nation, and that the latter's power and prosperity depended on the amount it possessed. All the credit, all the commerce, all the fighting strength of a country existed solely on a gold basis. He told me that whereas the cash deposits at the banks amounted to nearly a thousand million pounds, there was not a tenth of that gold in the country, and that a panic like that of the failure of Overend and Gurney brought ruin even to houses of established wealth and credit.

As I listened to him my heart swelled with pride and I saw myself indeed a king among men, a patriot, and a bulwark of the national credit and prosperity. I seemed like the hero of a fairy tale.

"Send us in all you like, Mr. Drew," he said as we parted. "We'd take a hundred million sterling, if you had it." He laughed, as though pleased at his own joke. He little knew that his words appeared to me in the light of an ordinary bargain.

I left, however, well pleased with the result of my visit. The gold had been assayed, and had been found to be of remarkable purity. I knew, too, that the outer world

would hear nothing of its receipt, or of how much was received, for banks are as secret as the grave in regard to their customers' affairs. I had no fear that any question would arise as to the origin of the gold. It did not matter to the Bank of England where it came from, and they would hardly trouble to make any enquiries.

So far all had gone well with me. I had no longer any fear of losing the source of my wealth. I had purchased the largest and strongest safe that I could find, and two armed men guarded it by day and night. I could afford to laugh at any further attempts to steal my property.

When I returned from London I resolved to take a week's holiday and devote myself to other matters than the mere amassing of wealth. I had only seen Mary Playle once during the past month and then only for a few minutes. I at once went over to Standinghoe and spent the whole of my first day with her.

She was a little cold at first and reproached me with neglect. But I explained to her that I had been working for her sake, and that sometimes a man had to leave his sweetheart for a year while he toiled in some foreign country to make his fortune.

"Still, a little time each day," she whispered, as I held her in my arms; "you could surely spare me a little time."

"I will give you all my life, soon, darling," I replied, "when I have finished money-grubbing. And I think of you all the time." And then I turned the conversation to what I had done, and of my plans for the future, of how I intended to rebuild Trunions and make it one of the

finest places in England, and of all the splendors I would devise, and the mansions I would purchase all over the world.

"And that reminds me," I concluded, "I did not forget you when I was in London yesterday. I bought you a little present."

I handed her a small leather case, and watched her face as she opened it.

"Oh, how lovely!" she cried. "Oh, it is good of you, dear."

A large single pearl of perfect shape and lustre glowed softly against a background of blue velvet. It had cost me £2,000.

"I want to have it set as a ring," I said; "as a new engagement ring. I will have it done for you, if you like the idea."

She glanced at the little circlet of small sapphires and diamonds on her finger, and pressed it to her lips. It had only cost a few pounds, but I guessed what was passing in her mind.

"I'd rather wear this one," she said shyly, "if you won't be angry with me. There won't be room for two on the finger, and this—this was the first."

I laughed and kissed her hand, telling her to have the pearl set as a brooch if she preferred it. But for all that, I was a little annoyed, and the more so because I felt that I ought to have been pleased.

When we separated that evening I felt strangely depressed. The day had not been altogether a happy one. A slight cloud seemed to have come over the sunshine of

our love. I put it down to the fact that my thoughts were so full of visions of wealth that I had unconsciously neglected the woman I loved.

When I reached home, I told myself that my day's outing had cost me about £30,000, and after dinner I went down into the cellar and worked hard all night to make up for lost time. A bad sign this, if I had only known it. But I could see no further than my pile of yellow bricks.

The next day I only spared the morning, and went back to my work after lunch. But I found time to wire for an architect. He came on the following day. I was too busy to go into details, but gave him a free hand to erect me a palace on the marshland behind Trunions, and adjoining the present house. I would not have a stone of the old building touched, and though there were a hundred fairer sites, even in the same county, a certain pride of ancestry made me stick to the place where so many of my forefathers had lived and died.

He asked me how much I was prepared to spend, and I told him a million, or double that, if necessary. But it had to be built in twelve months, if it took twenty thousand workmen to do it. If he referred to the Bank of England, he would receive an assurance that I should be able to pay for it.

I think the good man, who stood at the head of his profession, looked upon me as a lunatic, sent down by Providence for his especial benefit. He told me that he had just designed a palace for a Russian prince on the banks of the Neva, and that it would save time if he used the

same plans. I told him to build it as he liked, but that it must have a moat and rampart all around it and be essentially a palace within a fortress. He left me with a puzzled expression on his face and a check for £10,000 in his pocket.

I did not see Mary Playle at all that day, and only for an hour on the day following. The next day, however, I spent all the afternoon with her and worked the whole night to make up for it. I had now trebled the size of my furnace and was able to turn out a ton of gold a day.

The next day was the last I had set aside for a holiday, and, more than a little ashamed of myself, I devoted it all to the woman I loved. As we parted, I told her that I should probably be very busy for some time and would not be able to see much of her, and then, as delicately as possible, I approached a subject which had been in my mind for some days.

"I have been thinking, Mary dear," I said tenderly, "that it would be better if we put off our marriage for a little while, that is, if you don't mind. It seems a beastly thing to say, but I can't help thinking that it would be nicer for both of us. I should like to have the new house to welcome you to. I should feel that you were safer. They may strike at me through you."

"How long will it take to build?" she asked in a cold even voice.

"Only a few months," I replied; "ten thousand men are going to work on it, and I'll have the number doubled." She placed her hands on my shoulders and looked into my eyes. I laughed.

"What do you see?" I asked gaily.

"I see a pale, haggard face," she replied slowly, "weary eyes, a forehead wrinkled with constant care, a feverish twitching of the lips. I see all this, dearest, and it makes me very sad."

I took her in my arms and she burst into a fit of passionate sobbing.

"Give it all up," she cried, "for the love of heaven, for my sake. You are rich already. Throw the yellow box back into the sea! I wish you had never found it."

I tried to reason with her, but she refused to be comforted.

"I tell you what I will do, dearest," I said at last. "If you will arrange for our marriage to take place in two months' time, I will promise you that a month from to-day I will destroy the box and the globe and will never touch either again. I shall then have all my time to devote to you, and you will not be worried by my attention to the absorbing pursuit of gold. Moreover, our married life will not be marred by the fear of anything that may now desire to hurt us. Is it a bargain?"

She raised her face and her eyes shone brightly through her tears.

"Do you mean it?" she asked eagerly.

"I swear it on my word of honor," I replied.

"Then I will consent," she cried, "gladly consent—with all my heart. I feared this might go on forever. But I shall see you sometimes, shall I not?"

"Once a week for a whole afternoon," I replied. "Many lovers do not meet so often."

"And you will always do this? Each week?"

"Always," I replied, "so long as I am alive. Good-night, dear heart. I will call to-day week at two o'clock. Good-night, my dearest one."

"Good-night, my dear lover," she whispered, and after one passionate embrace we parted.

Long before I reached Trunions, I saw the flare of hundreds of lamps in the gathering darkness, and, as I drew near, I saw a vast army of men digging and wheeling away barrow loads of earth. Behind them stretched row after row of huts arranged in streets like a little town. The work had begun, and they were excavating the foundations of my new palace. For a whole year the work was never to cease by night or day. The very thought of it stirred my blood, and the face of Mary Playle vanished from my mind.

"A ton of gold a day," I muttered to myself, as I entered the library and locked the door. "Say, £120,000 a day. That is about £3,600,000 a month, or £43,200,000 in the year."

I took a whiskey and soda and a sandwich from a tray on the table and, throwing myself into an easy chair, juggled with figures till my brain reeled. The enormous sum of forty three million pounds seemed a mere trifle to my insatiate desires. As an income, well and good. But as a capital amount—why, there were men in America with more than that, mere vulgar financiers with no power to direct the destinies of nations. I rose to my feet and clenched my hands. I had but one year. I had sworn it.

I paced up and down the room like a maniac, and

every now and then I caught sight of my face, white, stern, and haggard, in a glass that hung on the wall. I hardly recognized it.

"I must have more," I growled like a wild beast; "I must have ten times as much. The output must be increased. I must get some one to help me, some one I can trust. To-morrow I must find some one."

Then I suddenly checked myself and remembered that I had taken a whole day's holiday, and that I was wasting the precious moments. I unlocked the door, went down a passage, and knocked five times on another door made of solid steel. There was a whirr and a click, and the door swung open. A great burly fellow faced me with a revolver, but on seeing who it was, he lowered his weapon and smiled.

"Everything right, Williams?" I asked.

"All is well, sir," he replied, and that is all that passed between us. He was a taciturn fellow, and both he and his comrade, who watched in turns, were well paid to keep their mouths shut, a virtue they practiced even in the presence of their master. Acting on explicit instructions, he crossed over to the far end of the room and turned his back on me.

I went up to the safe, a huge steel structure, nearly ten feet high and standing on a base six feet square, and arranged some letters on a disc so as to spell the word "lover." Then I inserted a small key which was fastened to a steel chain round my waist, and the door swung back of its own accord. I took out the precious globe—the only thing in the safe—left the room without a word, and

returned to the study. Then I locked the door and went down into the cellar.

This passage between the safe and the cellar was to me the most perilous part of the whole business. The globe was practically inaccessible in the safe, but it was possible for some one to steal it from me while it was about my person. I resolved that night to take the two watchmen into my confidence. They would act as a body-guard, and would, moreover, assist me to turn out a much larger quantity of gold.

The fire was banked up in the furnace and the application of a powerful artificial draught soon forced it into a white hot glow. In one corner of the room stood a large heap of leaden bars. Every day they were shot down a chute from outside like coals into a cellar. I took some of them and threw them on the furnace till it would hold no more, and then watched the metal subside into a molten lake covered with green and yellow scum.

Then I placed the globe in a sort of wire cradle and plunged it into the molten lead. I left it there for seven minutes and forty-three seconds by my watch, and then drew it out again. To all appearance nothing had happened, and the first time I tried the experiment I was grievously disappointed, for it did not then occur to me that the scum consisted of impurities, and naturally would not change.

I took an iron ladle and took off the crust on the surface, and there underneath glittered a pool of liquid gold. I poured it carefully off into moulds and once again filled up the crucible with lead.

And so I toiled all through the night, sweating in every pore, although I stood stripped to the waist; and every hour the pile of lead grew smaller, and the floor was covered with an ever increasing array of yellow bricks.

At last I stopped through sheer fatigue, and put on my clothes. I looked at my watch. It was half-past four.

Then suddenly I heard a muffled shriek overhead. I flung open the door and plainly heard a man's voice calling for help, but, before I had reached the top of the stairs, it had died away into an agonized moan. I burst into the library, revolver in hand. All was darkness, but I heard a series of cracks as though some enormous dog were crunching the bones of a giant chicken.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WARNING

FOR quite a minute I stood in the doorway at the top of the stairs, neither daring to go forward nor strike a match. A dull glow ascended from the cellar behind me, but it threw no light into the room, and only served to outline my own profile for the benefit of any one who wished to see it. I peered into the darkness, but could see nothing. The crunching noise ceased, but I heard something move.

"Who's there?" I cried out. There was no answer, but a chair fell over with a crash.

"Who's there?" I cried again. "If you don't answer I shall fire."

There was no reply, and my revolver rang out in the silence. In the brief flash of light I saw something dim and huge rise up like a cloud to overwhelm me; a terrible blow swept me off my feet, and I went tumbling down the stairs clutching at the stone walls as I fell.

I came with a crash on to the floor of the cellar and lay there half stunned and motionless against a pile of gold bricks. My eyes were fixed on the stairs, and I expected every moment to see something appear round the corner at the top of them. My revolver had been jerked from my hand and I could not even see where it had fallen. I was helpless, and at the mercy of anything that chose

to attack me. I was only half conscious, and everything swam in a misty yellow glow.

I waited for some time, and did not attempt to move. The shock had, I suppose, unnerved me, for I felt no desire to escape; death appeared to me as the inevitable course of fate, and it seemed foolish to struggle against it. Yet all the time I was numbed with horror at the thought of what form it might take.

Several minutes passed, and nothing appeared. My brain grew clearer, and I began to realize that I might yet escape. I struggled to my feet, aching in every limb, and searched about for my revolver. I eventually found it lying close to the heap of lead. Then I went to the foot of the stairs and listened. I could hear nothing but the beating of my own heart. I took the lamp in my left hand and cautiously ascended the steps.

When I reached the top, I peered round the corner, thrusting the lamp forward into the room. I saw nothing but a huddled heap on the floor. I went up to it and saw that it was a man. His face was crushed and covered with blood, and his limbs had been twisted into the most unnatural attitudes. He was unknown to me, but he was dressed like a common workman, and I suspected that he had come into the house with no good or lawful purpose.

I looked carefully round the room for some clue to what had actually happened. I saw a small bag on the floor, and, opening it, found a complete set of burglar's tools. There was no longer any doubt as to the intentions of the poor wretch who lay on the carpet like a crushed insect.

The dawn was now breaking in the east, and I went out of the house, carefully locking all doors behind me. A vast army of men was toiling at the foundations of my new palace—as they would toil night and day till the work was finished. The flare of the lamps looked pale and sickly in the gray light. The laborers moved to and fro unceasingly like a swarm of black ants.

I went to the man in charge of the night gang and told him that I wished to speak to him for a few minutes. I then took him straight into the library and showed him the dead man on the floor.

“Do you know who this poor chap is?” I asked.

The foreman looked at the battered face and shook his head. Then he felt in the man’s pockets and drew out one or two pieces of dirty paper.

“One of our men,” he said briefly. “No. 4,236. That’s all I can tell you. What has happened?”

“I found him here,” I replied; “like this. That is all I know about it. It looks as though he had come to rob me, but I cannot tell you how he died.”

The foreman looked round the room. The door leading to the cellar was closed, and was merely part of the paneling.

He shook his head.

“I don’t think I need keep you, Mr. Wiseman,” I said. “Please find out all you can about this man, and send the doctor to me at once.”

Trunions had already become a small town, with its own shops and its own doctor.

In a quarter of an hour Dr. Joyce appeared. He ex-

examined the poor lump of flesh and bone on the floor, and rose to his feet.

"Dead as a door-nail," he said quietly, "and nearly every bone in his body broken. If a ton of stone had fallen on him it could scarcely have done the work more thoroughly."

"Well, it is obvious that nothing has fallen on him," I replied. "What do you make of it? Would it be possible for something to have happened to him outside, and for him to have crawled in here to die? The window was open."

"Impossible," said the doctor. "He could not have moved a yard in that state."

And I, too, knew well enough that he couldn't, and I also knew that he had been crushed to death in that very room. But I asked the question as a matter of form. The whole incident was a most unfortunate one. Public attention would be again drawn to Trunions, and it would gain notoriety as the scene of a second mysterious crime, to which might have been added a third, if poor Simson had not had the grace to have a weak heart. I talked for a few minutes with the doctor, and then he left me to my own unpleasant thoughts.

Of a truth, although I was now the possessor of more wealth than I knew what to do with, I was the victim of most unfortunate circumstances, and I think, if the lust of gold had not taken so strong a hold on my heart, that I should have been half inclined to give up the whole business. This new accident would bring the police once more into the house, and I should once more have to lie hard to preserve my secret.

The inquest took place on the following day. It appeared that the man had obtained a job at the works for the purpose of carrying on his true business. He was well known to the police as a skilful professional burglar, and I had at any rate the satisfaction of knowing that the victim was not altogether undeserving of his fate.

The police made inquiries in their own clumsy way, but they discovered nothing, and indeed did not take much trouble over the matter. The man after all was a thief and had been killed in an act of burglary. It was quite clear that neither I nor any other man could have crushed the poor fellow to the state in which he was found. The doctor, indeed, volunteered a statement that was to the point, but which was listened to without any appreciation of its value. It was to the effect that he had only once seen a man in a similar condition, and that was in India, when he had been called in to see a native who had been crushed to death by a boa constrictor. The fearful injury to the bones, combined with absence of external wounds, had been the same in both cases.

Most of the people present regarded the statement as not without interest, but as having no particular bearing on the matter before them. To me, however, it was a terrible revelation of the truth, and I glanced at Billy Playle, who was one of the jury. His hideous face was impassive, and he appeared to take but little interest in the proceedings.

"Death from misadventure" was the verdict, and it was obviously correct. I was well pleased with the result. I had told a plain and straightforward story of how I

had found the man, and the coroner's questions had not affected my evidence. I simply said that I had found him and that was all. Such a statement did not admit of much cross-examination. My secret was safe.

I had, however, some trouble with the London papers. They sent down a horde of reporters, who buzzed about the place like wasps. I declined to see any of them, but they absorbed all the gossip of the neighborhood, and the next day I had the pleasure of reading headlines like the following:—

“A MYSTERIOUS MILLIONAIRE.”

“THE TRUTH ABOUT TRUNIONS.”

“HOW DID THE MAN DIE?”

and so on. One or two of them retold the whole story of my uncle's disappearance and invented the wildest theories to explain both disasters. I was annoyed at the publicity given to the matter, and I did not wish the eyes of all England turned towards my wealth. But it could not be helped, and I had to make the best of it.

There was, however, a more unpleasant critic to be faced than even the smart reporter of the *Daily Journal*. On the evening of the day of the inquest Billy Playle called to see me. I had just finished dinner and was sitting in the library for a few minutes before returning to my work in the cellar. I received no visitors in those days, and the servant had orders to tell every caller that I was engaged. Billy Playle, however, was obstinate, and the footman came and told me that he refused to go away until he had seen me.

"Very well," I said sharply, "I will see him for a minute or two." I was annoyed at the visit, but more than a little surprised. As far as I knew Playle had never been to Trunions in his life, and I guessed that only a matter of importance would induce him to call upon me. The object of his visit would be sure to be unpleasant. Urgent affairs are seldom anything else. It was possibly bad news about his niece.

I shook hands with him when he entered and offered him a chair, a cigar, and a glass of whiskey. He sat down without a word, lit the cigar, and drank half the whiskey at a gulp.

"Nice place this," he said, scrutinizing the room, as though he wished to discover something.

"The new one will be better," I replied with a smile. "How's Mary?"

"She's well, thank you," he said. "You don't see much of her now, you don't. Ain't cooling off, are you?"

"I'm very busy, Playle," I answered; "very busy. I can, in fact, only spare you a few moments, so I should be glad——"

"I'll get straight to what I came for," he interrupted. "I was at the inquest to-day."

"I saw you," I replied. "What did you think of the whole affair?"

"I think," he said bluntly, "that you know more about it than you chose to tell, Sir Harry. Without meaning any disrespect, I am forced to think that——"

"Is that what you have come to tell me, Playle," I

cried angrily, rising to my feet; "to accuse me of giving false evidence, to ——"

"Easy, easy, sir," he broke in. "I don't say that you haven't done right. But I'm here to speak my mind on one or two things, and it'll be for your good to listen—aye, that it will. And I've some right to speak, I have. I've got to look after my niece's happiness."

"Well, get to the point," I said sharply. "I'm very busy."

"I've been keeping my eyes open," he said, throwing away his cigar and starting to fill his pipe, "and I've been putting two and two together, I have, since the day you and I went out to that wreck on the Sunken Sands, and I'm damned if they don't nearly make four by now. In the first place I know well enough how that fellow died from misadventure, and you know too, and the doctor he got pretty near it, he did."

"If you knew," I replied, "why didn't you speak at the inquest?"

"They'd have laughed at me," he said, "all but you. You know well enough that he was crushed to death by a great snake, and you've seen it afore, and I've seen it afore—that night as we went out to the wreck."

"All this is very interesting, Playle," I said drily, "but not to the point."

"I know, and you know too," he continued, "that the wreck and your uncle's death, and your butler's death, and that wretched thief's death, and your uncle's wealth—aye, and your own wealth, too, are all connected, so to speak. Mines in South America? Mines in the New

Jerusalem. I know well enough how you're getting your gold, Sir Harry. You're making it, like a dairymaid makes cheese."

"You seem to know a damned sight too much, Playle," I retorted. "You'd better try and forget some of it."

"Do you remember the night of the wreck?" he continued, "and what I told you about the pleasant little time I had in China, and what I showed you just to make you think better of me? And do you remember the little row of Chinamen on the beach with their forefingers cut off? Can you guess now who it was that stole the secret of the devils that tortured me, and why that junk appeared off the coast?"

"I am not good at riddles," I answered lightly. Playle rose to his feet and clenched his great fists.

"You are a child playing with fire," he said solemnly; "aye, that you are, and you will burn not only your fingers, but your whole body and your soul. My niece loves you, and I am here to warn you. I do not know your cursed secret. I do not even know what it was that your uncle stole from the devils of the Kiao Lung, but I know this, Sir Harry, that they will get their own again; it may be years hence, but they will get their own. It was a long time before they found your uncle, but they made short work of him. They'll do for you, sir, and mebbe they'll wreck your soul before they touch your body!"

The man spoke earnestly and with rough eloquence. I could not doubt that he spoke as he felt, and that he was moved by a genuine desire to save me.

"Thank you, Playle," I said. "But I don't think I can come to much harm. The poor devils are all at the bottom of the sea." Yet I knew, as I spoke, that the wish was father to the thought, for I had long realized that some one was trying to steal the yellow box and its contents from me. Playle came close to me and placed one hand on my shoulder.

"They are not all dead, sir," he said in a low voice. "One at least is alive, for I saw him last night."

"Saw him?" I said slowly. "Saw a Chinaman here?"

"Aye," he continued, "I saw him right enough, and followed him too, till he slipped me in the marshes. I came on him suddenly, but not quick enough to lay hold of him. He was one of them right enough. The forefinger of the left hand missing. If I ever get to close quarters with him I'll screw his head off, though he's a big chap."

"I'm obliged for the warning," I said, "and I'll keep my eyes open, and you—you'll keep your mouth shut. I can pay well."

"I don't want money," he said roughly, as he moved towards the door, "I'm looking after Mary's happiness. If you'll take my advice, Sir Harry, you'll chuck the whole business, and get rid of the thing they're after."

"When my new house is finished," I answered, proudly, "it'll take an army to force an entrance into it."

"Yet one man can often get in where an army wouldn't have a dog's chance. Good-night, sir. I hope you're not offended. I'm a plain spoken man."

"Offended, Playle!" I cried, "no, of course not. Good-night, and give my love to Mary."

"I was looking at her little Bible yesterday, sir," he said quietly, "and I came across the following text, which she had marked with pencil: 'For what profit hath a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.' It seems to me to be to the point."

"'Soul' should properly be translated 'life,' Playle."

"Mebbe," he replied, "yet even life is worth having," and with this parting shot he left the room.

Directly he had gone I went down-stairs and worked all through the night at the furnace.

CHAPTER XVIII

A KINGDOM

DURING the next month I toiled almost ceaselessly day and night. I erected huge furnaces, and took the two watchmen into my confidence. The work was continuous, and the fires were never allowed to die out.

For myself, I snatched a few hours' sleep when I was too exhausted to keep awake. The men worked together for eight hours, and then took shifts of eight hours each. I had promised them the princely reward of £25,000 apiece if they would put in sixteen hours' work a day, and would swear to keep my secret. Between us we handled fifty tons of gold a day. Every twenty-four hours a barge unloaded its cargo of lead at high tide against the wall.

The whole month was one feverish dream of gold—of yellow bricks and white-hot fires, and long rows of stupendous figures in my pass-book. Every day more than five million pounds' worth of the precious metal was consigned to the Bank of England.

Long before the month was over I began to see that I was more than a mere money-grubber, and that I was becoming a power in the finance of the country. The Bank Rate dropped to two and a half at the very season of the year in which it usually rises. The editors of the

financial papers puzzled their heads in vain to find some reason for the extraordinary amount of gold that was being poured into the bank. Every day appeared the same legend.

“Shipments of gold from South America, £5,000,000.”

No one obtained any more information on the point. The Bank were bound to keep silence about the affairs of a private customer, and all inquiries in South America were obviously doomed to disappointment. But the fact remained that money was “easy,” and that every financier had reason to bless my name, if he had only been able to discover it.

The fall of the Bank Rate flattered my vanity, and I began to see myself not merely as a rich, but as a great man. A lust of power was added to the lust of gold. I resolved that I would loom large on the horizon of European politics, and control the destinies of nations. The idea was sweet, and every ounce of gold assumed a new value in my sight.

It may well be imagined that during this period I had but little time to devote to the softer pleasures of love. Yet I kept my promise, and met Mary Playle once a week. The interviews were short and not altogether satisfactory. My brain was so occupied with visions of wealth and power that I could scarcely give a thought to the woman who loved me. I confess now with shame that I thought it more than a kind action on my part to grant an interview at all.

The fact was that I had already begun to repent of the promise that I had made to Mary Playle. It seemed

mere madness to cut off the glorious stream of gold that was flowing to my credit in the Bank of England. Hour after hour, as I worked, I reasoned with myself, and argued with the mere ghost of a conscience.

"I have promised," said Conscience feebly.

"You did wrong," said Reason. "Think of all the good you can do in the world with your money, of the suffering you can relieve, of the poverty you can lighten, of the power that will be placed in your hands."

"So long as you keep the yellow box you are in danger," whispered Fear. "Peace is better than riches."

"Coward!" said Reason. "There is nothing to fear. With your wealth you can buy protection from anything in the world."

And so the discussion went on, hour after hour, and day after day, but all the time the furnaces poured out their stream of gold, and the great walls of the new Trunions rose inch by inch from the ground.

A few days from the end of the month I had sunk so low that I could no longer distinguish between honor and expediency. My mind trembled in the balance, and the weight of a feather would have turned the scale.

Then came the last day of all. For thirty hours I stood by the furnaces, and not one of the three of us had slept the night before. By Pluto! how we worked on that last day! No food passed our lips, though every now and then we drank feverishly from a jar of water. Stripped to the waist, we toiled in the glare of the furnaces like devils in the flames of hell. The sweat poured from our bodies. The veins stood out on our

foreheads as we hurled ton after ton of lead into the furnaces. There was not a pause, not a word spoken. It was a mad race, a last stupendous effort of the gold fever. Heart, nerves, muscle and brain were all strained to the utmost. I only asked myself one question: How much gold can we turn out by midnight?

At midnight the work was to cease. I had sworn it to Mary Playle. The next day the box and its contents were to be destroyed and the secret of the great Kiao Lung was to be lost forever. Small wonder that I worked as though my very life depended on the result of my labors.

From time to time I glanced at a clock which hung on the wall. The hands moved on remorselessly, ignorant of the fact that every minute was worth more than £3,000. I scowled at the timepiece as though it had designs on my wealth, but all the time I toiled till the room was a mere haze of golden light.

Then the hands pointed to 11:55, and I realized that the end had come.

"This is the last lot," I cried. "Look sharp!"

I plunged the globe into a sea of molten lead, and watched the metal change to liquid gold. By the time it was drawn off into the moulds the hands of the clock stood together at midnight.

"Just this little lot, sir," said one of the men, seizing a huge lump of lead in his brawny arms. I hesitated. Mary Playle would never know.

"Yes," I said hurriedly, "just that lump."

He cast it into the furnace, and at 12:10 it was con-

verted into gold. I had broken my oath. It was only by the margin of a few minutes, yet straws show which way the wind blows. The smallest crack may widen into an impassable gulf.

I closed the room for the night, locked up the globe in the safe, left it in charge of the new watchman I had appointed, and went to bed. I was so tired, so utterly worn out and exhausted, that I had not the energy to undress, and fell asleep in my clothes.

It was past noon when I woke and the sun was streaming into my room. My valet stood by the bedside regarding me with evident distress. The sight of a creased and crumpled clothes must have been exceedingly painful to his trim and well ordered mind. A small gold salver was poised in his left hand, and a large square white patch reposed on its glittering surface.

"Letters, Philip?" I asked with a yawn. He smiled indulgently.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," he whispered confidentially, as though the room were full of eager listeners.

"His card?" I asked with a smile, and took the piece of pasteboard from the salver. It was as large as an ordinary envelope and bore the following name in plain bold type:—

"Señor Don Rafael Garcia." I stared at it and blinked my eyes. The heavy black letters were particularly aggressive in the morning light.

"Who is it, Philip?" I asked. "Does he want to sell anything? Have I seen him before?"

"I don't think he's been here before, sir," replied the

valet. "But he appears to be a gentleman of importance, sir, if I may venture to say so."

"Get my bath ready," I said sharply, "and ask the gentleman to state his business."

In a few minutes Philip returned.

"Your bath is ready, sir," he said, "and the gentleman states that his business is for your private ear alone, but that it is of great importance. He is undoubtedly, if I may say so, sir, a gentleman of some rank and position." From which I gathered that he had tipped my valet handsomely.

"I will see him in an hour's time," I replied. "Meanwhile say that I shall be charmed if he will honor me with his company at lunch."

Philip left the room, and, as I dressed, I wondered who this gentleman with the Spanish name might be. It was possible that he was only in search of gold. I had many such visitors in those days, but had always been too busy to grant them an interview.

I felt much refreshed after my bath and was in excellent spirits as I made my way down-stairs. I found my visitor seated on the terrace by the sea. He was smoking a large cigar, but, as I advanced to greet him, he threw it away and bowed.

"Have I the infinite pleasure," he said in perfect English, but with a soft Southern accent, "of seeing the most noble Sir Harry Drew?"

"You have, sir," I replied, "and I regret that I was not up to receive you. But I kept late hours last night."

He smiled, and I gave a keen glance at his dark, hand-

some face. It somehow seemed familiar to me. He was no ordinary adventurer, this Don Rafael Garcia. I could see that at a glance. Tall, thin, and courtly, there was an air of dignity about him that can never be acquired by the races of Northern Europe. His birth and breeding were evident. From his grave lofty brow to his small perfectly shaped feet he was an aristocrat.

"Don Rafael Garcia?" I said, as though trying to recall the name. "Have I ever ——"

"No, Sir Harry," he interrupted. "You do not know the name. It is one that I assume for the purpose of traveling. In my own country I am known as the Duke of Bragues."

"The Duke of Bragues," I repeated mechanically. The name was known to all Europe. He was the guardian and chief councilor of the young Queen of Styria.

"And what," I said, after a short pause, "can I do for His Excellency the Duke of Bragues?"

"May I suggest," said the Duke, "that, as you have been kind enough to ask me to have lunch with you, it would be pleasanter to discuss business after our meal. I have been engaged a good deal in diplomatic work and have always found it a good plan to feed first and talk afterwards."

I laughed and looked at my watch.

"Lunch will be ready in half an hour," I said. "Would your Excellency like to have a look at my building operations?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," he replied. "I noticed them as I drove up to the house. They are

stupendous, wonderful. It is a veritable army of workmen."

"Twenty thousand men," I said, with a glow of pride; "they work day and night."

"Gigantic!" he murmured. "We have but twice as many men in the army of Styria."

I conducted him to the scene of the operations. The walls had now risen to the first floor and formed a huge square, each side of which was two hundred and fifty yards in length. The whole place swarmed with men. Steam cranes swung stone after stone into position. A small line had been laid between Trunions and the nearest station, and trucks moved to and fro continuously.

"It is superb," he exclaimed. "What energy! What wealth! But is it a palace that Sir Harry Drew builds for himself or a fortress?"

"A mixture of the two," I replied. "I have many enemies." He glanced at me keenly and smiled.

"I have always heard," he said, "that the English police ——" and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, yes, an excellent force," I interrupted, "but inadequate in a case like this. What do you think of the design?"

"It is charming," he replied; "but may I venture to ask why, with all your beautiful England to choose from, you have chosen this dreary spot?" and he glanced round at the flat, lonely marshes, the long stretch of mud, and the level waste of waters.

"The home of my fathers," I said with some show of feeling.

"Ah, yes," he cried, "I understand. But to me, fresh from the green mountains and blue lakes of Styria, it is a wilderness. I could not live in such a place as this."

We inspected the building, talked to the foreman and the architect, and then went in to lunch. Anxious to impress the Duke of Bragues, I had arranged that the meal should be somewhat of a function. The sideboard blazed with gold plate, and a dozen footmen waited at the table.

When it was over, we retired to the library and lit our cigars. For a few moments we sat in silence. I was puzzling my brain to guess what the Duke of Bragues could want with me, and he doubtless was deciding how he could best open the conversation. He was the first to break the silence.

"South America," he said, "is a wonderful country. Have you ever been there, Sir Harry?"

I guessed what was coming and was half inclined to tell a lie. But I thought better of it. It was possible the Duke might know the country well.

"No," I replied.

"Then you were fortunate indeed," he continued, "to secure a gold mine which, from all accounts, must be the richest in the world."

"Who has informed your Excellency," I said coldly, "that I have a gold mine in South America?"

"I have informed myself," he replied. "I have made it my business to acquaint myself with all that is to be known about the richest man in the world. I know you will believe me, Sir Harry, when I tell you that I have no impertinent curiosity in the matter."

"I do not see," I answered quietly, "that my wealth at all concerns your Excellency."

"I hope to show you," he said with a pleasant smile, "that it is of considerable interest to me. In fact, I have traveled night and day from Styria with the sole object of conversing with you."

"I am flattered," I replied. "But I am a plain English squire, your Excellency. You need not trouble to approach me diplomatically. Get straight to the point and tell me what you want. I will then give you a straightforward answer."

"I am charmed with your candor," he said sweetly. "It will save a great amount of talking. Well, to be frank with you, Sir Harry, I am here as the representative of the Queen and Government of Styria, and I am authorized, on their behalf, to negotiate a loan with you on terms that I hope will meet with your approval."

"I have never heard," I answered with some asperity, "that the credit of Styria is particularly good. What security do you offer?"

The Duke of Bragues rose from his chair and seated himself on a large couch by my side.

"Before I come to the question of terms," he said in a low voice, "I will inform you of certain complications that have arisen in Styria during the last six months. You are doubtless aware that our queen is a young and very beautiful woman."

"If one can judge from her portraits," I replied, "she is an exceedingly beautiful woman."

"You are also aware," he continued, "that the little

kingdom of Styria is sandwiched between two great countries."

"I am aware of that," I replied.

"You can also guess," he went on, "that each of these great countries has cast envious eyes on the strip of land that could be so easily included in its own boundaries."

"It is not unlikely," I said.

"Well, as ill luck will have it," the Duke continued, "the Crown Princes of both countries have fallen genuinely in love with the Queen of Styria. As you can imagine, their respective fathers approve of their choice. The Queen cares for neither of them, and, if she did, we should not allow her to contract a marriage which would certainly destroy the independence of Styria. Pressure is being brought to bear on us by both parties. The situation is acute. Have I made the position plain to you, Sir Harry?"

"I understand," I replied, "but I do not see how I can assist you out of your difficulties."

"I will explain," he said, relighting the cigar which he had allowed to go out. "It is very simple. The National Debt of Styria amounts to about £100,000,000 of your English money. The people of Styria are poor, and nearly the whole of the bonds are in the hands of foreigners."

"In the hands of—— and ——?" I said, "the two great powers who wish to annex the country?"

"Precisely," he replied, "and the interest is—well, it is somewhat in arrears. Both Governments are, on certain conditions, prepared to liquidate the loan, and put the

country on a sound financial basis. Here, again, pressure is being brought to bear on us from two opposite quarters. We fear a rising of the people. You can well imagine that an abolition of the National Debt would appeal strongly to the taxpayer."

"I can well believe it," I said with a grim smile, "and I suppose you wish me to pay off the National Debt?"

"I am authorized to ask you to do so."

"To lend your country a hundred million pounds, and—well, whistle for the interest?"

He flushed.

"We are prepared to offer you security," he said with a frown; "ample security."

"Security is valueless," I retorted, "unless it is lodged here in England. If a government chooses to repudiate a loan——"

"Listen to me," he interrupted. "I have a proposition to make to you. I am authorized to offer you the kingdom of Styria as security for this loan."

"The kingdom of Styria," I exclaimed. "I'm afraid I do not understand your Excellency. You cannot mortgage a country like a man mortgages a farm."

"I explained to you just now," he replied, speaking almost in a whisper, "that there are two suitors to the hand of our Queen, and that her marriage with either of them means the annexation of Styria. The possibility of such a marriage must be prevented at any cost. The Queen, and we, her councilors, have decided that she must at once contract a marriage with a third party. A poverty-stricken princeling is of no use to us. We desire

to kill two birds with one stone, as your English proverb has it; to remove the Queen from the Royal marriage market of Europe, and free ourselves from any financial obligations to —— and —— . Now, do you understand, Sir Harry Drew?"

"Ye gods!" I cried, rising to my feet, and trying to collect my thoughts. The magnitude of the proposition struck me dumb with amazement. I had no words with which to reply to such an astounding offer. I walked over to the mantelpiece, threw my cigar in the grate, and made a pretence of filling my pipe. The Duke of Bragues was silent, but I knew that he was watching my face.

"Your Excellency is jesting," I said after a pause. "I am well aware that the Royal Houses of Europe only marry among themselves."

"You must also be aware," he said sternly, "that the Duke of Bragues is not likely to have traveled post haste from Styria in order to crack a joke with Sir Harry Drew."

"Well," I persisted, "do you really believe that any man in the world is the owner of a hundred million pounds?"

"I know such to be the case," he replied calmly, "or I should not have discussed the matter with you."

"As you know so much of my private affairs," I continued, "you may have heard that I am already pledged to marry some one else, a lady whom I love very dearly."

The Duke smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"The Queen of Styria is a very beautiful woman," he said enigmatically.

"And what does she think of it all?" I asked. "Is she willing to be sold for the sake of her country to a man of another nationality? Or, perhaps, she has not been consulted in the matter?"

"Her Majesty," replied the Duke gravely, "is beloved by her people, and no one in Styria would dare to try and force her into a distasteful marriage. She is fancy free; she is well acquainted with your position, the antiquity of your family, and the record of your blameless life. Your portrait is at this present moment in her private boudoir. She has, if I may say so without offense, expressed herself satisfied with your personal appearance."

I burst out laughing. I pictured to myself the young Queen perusing the scanty records of my Oxford career, and glancing from time to time at my photograph. There was a humorous side to the whole affair. But the Duke of Bragues frowned at my merriment.

"I think it would be worth your while," he said gravely, "to regard this proposition with an open and serious mind. You are a man of enormous wealth, but, after all, the value of gold only consists in what it can purchase, and you, the richest man in the world, will not be much better off than an ordinary millionaire. Lands, houses, yachts, jewels, pictures, you can have as many of these as you please. You can have power, too, for you can control stocks and railroads; can buy honors and peerages, bully high Ministers of State. But, all said and done, you will only be a rich Englishman; your power will only differ in degree from that of a dozen other men.

You will have no real authority. In some respects you will be inferior to the ordinary policeman."

"And what does the Duke of Bragues offer me that I cannot buy elsewhere?"

He rose to his feet with flashing eyes.

"I offer you a kingdom," he exclaimed. "Surely a man's ambition can rise no higher than a throne."

"It is a very small kingdom," I replied.

"I offer you a sweet and beautiful woman for your wife."

"I am already betrothed to a sweeter and more beautiful woman. No, your Excellency, I am flattered by your offer, but I regret that I must decline it. I will admit that one side of it appeals to me, but the matrimonial part of it is impossible."

"You have my respect," he said quietly. "I regret that I cannot persuade you to accept my offer. I am well assured that you would be a credit to Styria. I shall be in London for a fortnight. A letter addressed to our Legation will find me. I have the honor, Sir Harry Drew, to wish you good afternoon."

He bowed, and shortly afterwards took his departure. I had triumphed. But the defeated diplomatist had left his poison to work in my brain.

CHAPTER XIX

THE YELLOW MAN

I HAD much to occupy my thoughts after the departure of the Duke of Bragues. I stayed on in the library and smoked pipe after pipe, as I pondered over the extraordinary and unprecedented proposal that he had placed before me. The idea of a kingdom exercised a peculiar fascination over my mind. I had all an Englishman's love of pomp and power. The clash of arms, the glitter of uniforms, the pageantry of Royal State had always roused my enthusiasm.

I rose to my feet, and, crossing over to the bookcase, pulled down the first volume of a monumental encyclopædia and looked out Styria.

I learned that it was a country about as big as Wales, and with a population of eight million people; that it had seventy-five miles of coast line, and that it was separated from its two powerful neighbors by a gigantic barrier of mountains. The inhabitants were described as being a hardy pastoral race. The capital of Viera was said to be noted for the magnificence of its buildings, which were out of all proportion to the size of the country. The palace was the finest in Europe. The national debt was estimated at £92,000,000, a large part of which had been incurred by the father of the present queen,

who seemed to have had a mania for military defense. He had placed a ring of fortifications round the whole border, had purchased a large supply of modern artillery, and had raised and equipped a standing army. There were various details about exports, imports, revenue, and expenditure. A map, a view of the cathedral of Viera, and a woodcut of a peasant in the national costume formed pleasing additions to the letterpress.

I sat down, and placing the heavy volume on my knees, studied the formidable mass of information that the enterprise of a great firm had placed at my disposal. I did not even skip the history of the country from the time of the Romans. When I had finished, I leaned back in my chair and smoked thoughtfully, and in the blue smoke I saw visions so glorious that the mere sovereignty of a petty state shrank into insignificance beside their splendor. I saw Styria holding the balance of power in Europe. I saw her as an iron thorn in the sides of two great nations. With unlimited gold the country could be transformed into one huge fortress. Her mountains would bristle with guns, her seas would swarm with powerful cruisers and battleships. In her fertile valleys and her wooded slopes I could sow my dragon's teeth of gold, and there would spring up a crop of armed men, hardy, muscular men, who would be paid so well for their services that they would find it more profitable to fight than to reap or sow.

Then one day there would come a conflict between the two great nations—it already loomed on the horizon—and Styria would wait, like an eagle perched on a crag, till she could swoop down into the field of battle and de-

cide the fortunes of war. Then she would exact the price and swell her dominions with land wrested from a fallen foe.

All this I saw in the blue wreaths of smoke and I pictured myself as a second Napoleon, the warrior king of Styria, feared and hated by the whole of Europe, but so loved by my subjects that they would deem it an honor to die for me.

Then my pipe went out, the smoke cleared away, and my eyes fell on the portrait of Mary Playle which always stood on the mantelpiece. A hot flush of shame rose to my cheeks and temples. I started to my feet with an oath and flung the heavy volume to the floor. The visions of glory shrank and faded into a dark cloud, and across the cloud, in letters of fire, was written the single word "DISHONOR."

"I must be going mad," I muttered to myself; "even to think of such a thing." Then I remembered that I had promised to destroy the yellow box and its contents on that very day. I looked at my watch. It was now 4:30 P. M. I should keep my promise if I got rid of it before midnight. I would leave it in the safe for the present. It would be better to do the job after nightfall. The box could be burned, but the globe was practically indestructible. It would have to be cast into the sea or the mud. It would have to be cast where no one would ever find it again. Such a deed was better done in the darkness. It would be as well if even my own eyes could not distinguish its final resting place.

The sudden revulsion from my dream of future power

and glory was so strong that all doubts about the advisability of destroying the secret of Kiao Lung had vanished. For the moment my mind was occupied with sweet visions of Mary Playle, and her wishes seemed as inexorable as the laws of the universe. Before I went down to dinner that evening I lit one of the furnaces and consumed the yellow box to ashes. The globe still remained in its gigantic steel case awaiting the time when it was to vanish forever from the sight of men.

After dinner I went into the library and smoked a quiet cigar before I set out on my expedition. I had resolved to take the precious globe out to sea in a boat and drop it in ten fathoms of water. It should lie deep, where neither I nor any one else could ever bring it up to the surface again.

At ten o'clock I left the library and made my way down the passage to the room which contained the safe. I gave the signal at the door, and it was opened by one of the watchmen. He crossed to the window and turned his back while I unlocked the safe and took out the globe. I thrust it carelessly into my pocket and left the room.

I then returned to the library, put on my cap, and thrust a loaded revolver into my pocket. I had no longer any desire to guard the globe, but I knew that there were others who desired it, and who would not hesitate to take my life in a struggle for the possession of it. As far as I was concerned, the thing was valueless. I had sworn to throw it away, and I intended to keep my oath. But I certainly did not propose to let it fall into the hands of any one else.

It was a clear starlight night, and a full yellow moon was creeping up from the sea as I walked along the bank towards Standinghoe. It was not yet high enough above the horizon to give any light, but, seen through the mist which hung over the calm waters, it looked twice its natural size. The tide was far out and, save where a dull golden pathway stretched across the level plain, I could scarcely distinguish the mud from the sea.

The whole scene was inexpressibly calm and silent, and to a man who had scarcely left the house for a whole month it was full of the promise of rest and quietude. So long had I toiled beneath the ground, and so long had I feasted my eyes on nothing but the white-hot glow of furnaces and the yellow glint of molten gold, that the pure air and the clear sky, and the sweet scent of the earth and its grasses came as a revelation to my fevered brain. I drank them in with lungs and eyes and nostrils, and thanked God that He had given to all men the treasures that no man is rich enough to buy.

And as I walked along the bank in the silence and the dim restful light I felt mightily pleased with myself. In my own eyes I was little short of a hero. I had conquered temptation, and St. Anthony himself could scarcely have been tempted more sorely. A throne, a kingdom, all the power and pomp and glory of empire had been dangled as a bait before me. And I had rejected them for the sake of the woman I loved. Fabulous wealth, exceeding all the riches of the whole world, was still in my hands, and I was about to cast it into the depths of the sea because of my promise to Mary Playle.

"Surely," I said to myself, as I gazed ahead at the small twinkling lights of Standinghoe, "love that has stood such tests as these will endure for all eternity."

I uttered the words half aloud and, as if in answer to them, there came a mocking cry from the silence, a screech of laughter mingled with a wail of pain. I stopped and my hand went involuntarily to my pocket. Something white flashed past me in the air. I laughed. It was only a seagull that I had frightened from its slumbers. Its melancholy cry went circling over the sea and then died away in the distance.

But this trivial incident seemed to have broken the spell of silence. Faint noises began to tremble in earth, and sea, and sky. Insects chirped in the grass; a faint breeze stirred the reeds till they rustled like a silk dress; there was the scarcely audible plash of waves on the distant fringe of mud. A dog barked on a farm; some small animal scampered out of a clump of bushes. It had a curious effect, this sudden awakening of the night. I glanced at the east, half expecting to see the first gray light of dawn.

But I only saw the moon, white and resplendent, now that she had risen from the mists of the sea. Perhaps the birds and beasts and insects had mistaken her light for that of the rising sun. She hung in the dark blue sky like a gigantic arc light. The stars had fled or diminished to mere specks of silver dust. For miles inland the country was mapped out in vivid contrasts of black and white. Every dyke and pool glittered like a piece of looking-glass, and the great estuary seemed to

cleave the marshland in twain with a sword of burnished steel.

Then half a mile ahead of me the figure of a man suddenly appeared on the top of the bank, and advanced rapidly towards me. I kept my hand on the butt of my revolver, and did not move it till the man was within a few yards of me. Then I saw that it was Loring, one of the two men who had assisted me at the furnaces during the past month. He was a tall, broad-shouldered fellow, pleasant and obliging in manner, and I had taken a liking to him from the very first.

"Hello, Loring," I said. "Lovely night, isn't it? Where on earth did you spring from just now?"

"I've been to Standinghoe, sir," he answered respectfully. "I thought I heard something move in the reeds, and I just walked along the bottom of the bank to see if I could find anything."

"I'm going to Standinghoe myself," I said. "I'm going out in my little yacht to-night. Would you care to walk as far as the village with me?"

"With pleasure, sir," he replied. "It's a fine night for a walk."

"Have a cigar?"

"Thank you, sir. I shall be leaving here to-morrow, sir."

"What are you going to do with your money?" I asked.

He explained to me his plans for the future. They were modest enough; the sudden accession of wealth did not appear to have turned his head. When he had

finished, I took the globe out of my pocket and showed it to him.

"Have a good look at it, Loring," I said with a smile, "for no one will ever see it again after to-night," and I explained to him how I intended to cast it into the sea.

I spoke with some bravado, as a man might speak, who is casting from him the most valuable thing in all the world.

Loring listened with interest, and I thought that I detected a new expression on his honest face.

"Seems a pity, sir, don't it?" he said when I had finished; "so much good might be done with the money."

"And so much evil, Loring," I replied, replacing the globe in my pocket.

For a few minutes we walked on in silence.

Then suddenly, and without a word of warning, Loring flung himself upon me, gripped my arms, jerked the revolver from my pocket, and flung me to the ground.

"Are you mad, Loring?" I cried.

He did not answer, but I looked into his face and saw the lust of gold in his eyes, even as I had seen it in my own during the past month. I said nothing more, but exerting all my strength, tried to fling him from me. I was strong and active enough, but no match for the man who held me. He was my superior in weight and muscle, and he had the position of advantage.

As I struggled, he shifted one hand on my throat.

"Be quiet, sir," he gasped. "I don't want to hurt you. I only want that metal ball. It won't be any loss to you if I take it. You are going to throw it away."

I did not answer, but looked up into his face. It was ablaze with desire, cruel, hard and passionate. I concentrated all my strength in a swift and violent effort, and we both rolled down the bank to the edge of the mud.

Loring again was on the top, and his huge weight had crushed the breath out of my body. I was dazed and half stunned.

He bound my hands and feet, and I had not the strength to resist him.

Then he took the metal globe from my pocket, and rose to his feet.

"I am sorry, sir," he said apologetically.

I made no reply. My eyes were fixed on something that had risen above the top of the bank. Loring had his back to it and saw nothing. It was the head of a man, large, yellow, and hideous. The cheek-bones were very prominent, and the eyes mere slits in the huge face. It somehow reminded me of the yellow moon that had risen out of the sea. It only appeared for a few seconds and then vanished. For the moment I forgot Loring, and my mind went back to the night when the strange vessel had gone to pieces on the Sunken Sands.

"I am sorry, sir," Loring repeated, "but I've got to have it. I couldn't let such a thing as that lie at the bottom of the sea. It would be a cruel waste, a wicked, sinful waste."

"You scoundrel," I cried. "I have paid you £25,000. You swore to preserve my secret."

"I shall keep my oath," he replied; "your secret will be

safe with me. It is my secret now. You may be sure I shall not talk about it."

"You damned rogue!" I shouted.

"There is no need for hard words, sir," he said quietly, "and you are acting, if I may venture to say so, like the dog in the manger. You don't want this thing yourself, and you won't let any one else have it. I'm afraid I must gag you, as you seem inclined to make a noise."

He started cutting a long strip of cloth from my coat. Then he bound this round my ankles, and removed the handkerchief which he had originally used as a rope. As I watched him, an idea occurred to me.

"How did you know I was coming along here to-night?" I asked.

"I didn't know," he replied. "I never had any thought of stealing the globe till to-night, until you told me you were going to throw it away. Then I suddenly realized that I must have it, even if I had to kill you to get it."

"So you would not have stopped at murder, you scoundrel?"

"No," he replied savagely, "I should not have stopped at murder."

I looked at his face and marveled. The honest kindness of it had entirely vanished and had given place to a lean, hungry look. I wondered what power had worked this sudden transformation. For a whole month the man had been dazzled with the sight of pools and streams of gold. Yet till to-night he had by his own confession been an honest man, and certainly, if character can be judged by the face, I had every reason to believe him.

"I must gag you," he said after a slight pause. "I can't have you calling out."

"I'll keep quiet," I said, "but I shall do my best to escape."

"Will you swear not to call out? On your word of honor as a gentleman?"

"I swear it, on my word of honor as a gentleman."

"I will trust you," he said, "but I will guarantee you won't escape."

He went on his knees, and cutting a dozen strips of cloth off my coat, proceeded to bind me till I was swathed like a mummy.

"Now you might be kind enough to move me," I said. "I am rather too close to the mud, and, if there should be a spring tide to-night, it would be a bad lookout for me."

He picked me up in his arms, and carrying me to the top of the bank, laid me right across the path.

"You will be safe enough there," he said, with a smile. "But don't move about too much, or you'll roll down again. One of the carters at the Lower Cant Farm will be along here shortly after daybreak. Good-bye, sir, and, if you ever hear of a man whose wealth surpasses your own, you will know who it is."

He turned on his heel and left me. Before he had gone fifty yards, however, an idea occurred to me, and I called out to him. He turned, hesitated, and then came back.

"What do you want?" he said roughly.

"Where is my revolver?"

"I threw it in the mud," he replied, "and it'd be of no use to you with your hands tied."

"No," I said quietly, "but I thought you might like to have it. If anybody knew what you have on you ——"

"No one does know," he answered; "who should know? I am obliged to you for your forethought, but I think I can take care of myself."

"Good-bye," I said, "and a pleasant journey to you."

He did not answer, but walked away from me with long swinging strides. I watched his tall figure till it disappeared from the top of the bank. Then I knew that he had taken a short cut across the marshes to Sneathing, which was the nearest railway station.

When he had vanished from my sight, I set to work to try and free myself from my bonds. But all my efforts were of no avail, and after an hour's useless struggle I abandoned the task, and lay quietly on my back, with my face to the moonlit sky.

The whole land had once more relapsed into silence. The breeze had died away, and the motionless sea crept up the mud like a smooth lake of oil. The beating of my heart sounded loud in the stillness.

My thoughts were none of the sweetest, as I lay there, trussed like a fowl, and absolutely defenseless. A stray horse or cow could have trampled me to death, and there were more dangerous things than horses or cows abroad that night. I could not forget the large yellow face that had peered over the top of the bank. I had no doubt it was Billy Playle's Chinaman, the man with the missing forefinger, the castaway from the wreck, the member of the strange and terrible society that had once owned the yellow box and its precious contents.

I fervently hoped that he had seen Loring take the globe from me. As for Loring, he could look after himself. It was his own fault that he was not armed with my revolver. And in any case he was a scoundrel, and deserved all that he was likely to meet with on his way to Sneathing,

I had no doubt that the yellow stranger had transferred his attentions from myself to Loring, but even the certainty of this would not have freed my mind from anxiety. It was possible that Loring might escape, and that the pursuer might return to wreak his vengeance on my helpless body. He came of a race that enjoyed cruelty for its own sake, and might easily pass a pleasant hour in torturing me to death.

Then again, apart from the fear of this man, I was afraid of something else that might be creeping towards me from marsh or sea. I had not forgotten how the burglar had died in the library at Trunions. If this foul monster should chance to come across me I was a doomed man. There was no chance of escape.

In addition to the terrors of fear, I was in acute bodily pain. My bonds had been tied so tightly that they checked the free circulation of blood through my body. I shivered with cold, and ached in every limb. A heavy dew was falling and the vapor from the marshes seemed to strike a chill to my very bones.

I passed through a lifetime of pain and fear that night. The minutes dragged by like hours. The slightest sound sent a thrill of terror through every nerve. Long before the day broke I had breathed a silent prayer

that Loring had been pursued, captured, and tortured to death.

At last, however, after two hours of total darkness the eastern sky faded from black to gray. I watched it with eager eyes, and saw a pale yellow flush rise up into the sky, and then the tint of roses on a bank of fleecy clouds far overhead, and then at last the rim of the sun itself. From my heart I thanked God for the light of day.

Half an hour after sunrise a man came slouching along the bank from Standinghoe. He was old and rugged and bent with toil. His eyes were fixed on the soil from which he wrung his scanty living, and he did not see me till he was within a few yards of my prostrate body.

"Wull, to be sure," he exclaimed, looking at me as though I was some strange animal that barred his progress.

"Don't stare at me, you fool," I cried, "but cut these bandages."

"Well, I'm danged if it ain't Sir Harry Drew," he continued, scratching his head. "Wull, I do declare now ——"

"Release me, you idiot," I yelled.

"I do be coming, Sir Harry," he replied; "I do be coming," and he advanced gingerly towards me.

"Lord love us, and how did you get here, Sir Harry?" he continued, producing a large clasp knife from his pocket and trying the edge of it leisurely with his thumb.

I repressed a savage oath, and he proceeded to hack through the strips of cloth that bound me hand and foot. When he had finished, I tried to rise to my feet, but fell back again on the grassy slope of the bank.

"Wull, to be sure," said the old man thoughtfully. Then he produced a small medicine bottle full of gin.

"Do 'ee have a drop now," he continued, "it be a rare thing for the ague. Do 'ee now?"

I took the proffered bottle and drank half of it at a single gulp. The raw cheap spirit bit into my throat like fire, and I coughed violently. But the warmth and sting of it was delicious to my chilled body. I made a mental note that I would send the old man a dozen of the finest whiskey that money could procure.

In a few minutes my circulation was restored and I was able to make my way back to Trunions. The old man accompanied me to the door and left, well pleased with the sovereign that I thrust into his horny hand.

I found one of the night watchmen, sent him off post-haste into Sneathing to inform the police about Loring and then went straight to bed. I did not wake up till half-past three in the afternoon, when my valet came into the room to tell me that an Inspector had arrived, and was waiting below to see me.

I dressed, had a cold bath, and went down-stairs. In the library I found Inspector Collins, a burly black-bearded fellow, whom I knew well enough, for he had assisted in the search for my uncle, and had also been employed in connection with the death of the burglar.

"Well, Collins," I said, "have you got the fellow?"

"Aye, we've got him right enough, sir," he replied grimly. "Please tell me all you know about the matter."

I told him in as few words as possible, and, save for the fact that I described the globe as "a valuable curio," and

that I omitted all the conversation that had passed between myself and Loring, I gave a fairly accurate account of what had actually transpired.

When I had finished, Collins stroked his black beard thoughtfully.

"We got your message at 8:30 this morning," he said, "and I put six men on the job. We found the fellow at 1:30. He had not got very far. Williams found him in the marshes dead as a door-nail. His head was completely severed from his body."

"Murdered!" I cried with well simulated astonishment. "Impossible! Why, whoever ——" and I stopped as though words had failed me.

"Yes," the man replied, "it's a clear case of murder, Sir Harry. A man's head doesn't come off his body by accident. No such article as you describe was found on the fellow. I reckon the murderers made off with it. Valuable, too, I reckon. Loring robbed you, and would have killed you if it had been necessary. Loring himself was robbed and murdered. I reckon that curio was valuable."

"It was most valuable," I replied, "and I will give £20,000 if the murderer is caught and another £20,000 if the curio is returned to me. That ought to buck you all up, Collins."

"It's a stupendous reward," he said; "gigantic. I've no doubt we'll get the man. Before to-night the whole of England will be on the lookout for him. He will move in a network of spies."

I laughed derisively.

"Have you any clue?" I asked.

"Yes," the inspector replied, "we have this," and pulling a small round object from his waistcoat pocket he displayed it on the palm of his hand. It was a button made of some yellow metal and curiously engraved with Chinese characters.

"This was found in Loring's hand," Collins continued. "Chinese undoubtedly. It is a valuable clue. It is even possible that it may lead to more than the discovery of Loring's murderer."

"I do not understand you," I said with a frown.

"Well it's like this, Sir Harry," he said in a confidential tone. "This place is getting a bad name. First there was your uncle's disappearance, then your butler's death, then the burglar's death, and now the murder of this poor fellow. I'll tell you in confidence, sir, that some of our London folks have got their eyes on this part of the world. There are half a dozen detectives among your workmen—half a dozen of the best men from Scotland Yard. But I reckon we Essex men will prove a match for them. I look on this button, sir, as the clue to the whole business."

"I hope it will prove so," I replied. "In any case I hope I shall have the pleasure of paying you £40,000."

"Forty thousand pounds!" he murmured, as though lost in admiration at the amount. "It's a fortune. We'll find the fellow, Sir Harry; we'll find him."

He asked me a few more questions, and then left. When he had gone, I walked over to the window and,

looking out across the sea, thanked God that Loring had robbed me and left me bound in the darkness. Otherwise Inspector Collins might have been searching for the murderer of Sir Harry Drew, of Trunions.

CHAPTER XX

THE CURSE

I HAD arranged to meet Mary Playle as soon as I had destroyed the yellow box and its contents. At our last interview she had implored me, with tears in her eyes, to come and tell her that my promise had been fulfilled.

"When next we meet," she had whispered, with her arms around my neck, "you will be free from this bondage and I shall hear the glad news from your own lips. And not till then shall I be happy."

And so directly Collins had left I set out for Standing-hoe. I had a clear conscience and should have been in excellent spirits, in spite of my adventure of the night before. I had ceased the manufacture of gold within a quarter of an hour of the stipulated time. I had done my best to get rid of the globe, and I had declined the offer of a kingdom. Of a truth I did not fear to meet Mary Playle.

Yet, as I walked along the bank, I could think of nothing but the loss of what might truthfully have been described as the most precious thing in the world. I felt as though something of vital importance had been wrenched out of my life, leaving behind it a blank that nothing else could ever fill. I had a vague desire to pursue Loring's murderer and not rest till I had made him

disgorge his booty. Loring's death seemed comparatively unimportant. The essence of the crime lay in the theft.

As I neared Standinghoe, I tried to dismiss the matter from my thoughts and called to my aid all the strength of my love for Mary Playle. I told myself that, as I had vowed to destroy the globe, the loss of it made no difference to me. But neither reasoning nor love served to fill the void, and I was conscious of an ill defined desire to have the thing once more in my possession.

I called for Mary Playle, and, as her uncle was out and a dark overcast sky threatened rain, we decided to stay in the house.

"Well," she said shyly, after our first greetings were over, and we had settled to remain indoors, "what news have you for me?"

"The best of news," I replied, assuming a cheerfulness that I did not feel. "I turned out my last bar of gold at 12:15 the night before last."

She threw her arms round my neck and kissed me passionately. "My dear brave lover," she said, "I knew you would not fail me. And the box with its contents?"

"The box," I answered slowly, "has been burned. The globe was stolen from me last night as I was on my way to fulfil my promise, and cast it into the sea." And I told her the story of my adventures.

"How horrible," she cried, when I had finished. "We heard this morning of the body that had been found in the marshes. And to think that, but for an accident, it might have been you. Oh, my dearest lover, thank God

that this thing has passed out of our lives." Her face was white and she shuddered at the mere thought of what might have happened to me. I folded her in my arms and kissed her again and again. For the moment I had no desire for anything but her love.

"Well, it is all over now, darling," I said with a smile. "No one will attempt my life, for they have nothing to gain by it. They cannot take my gold from me. It is all over and done with. Nothing remains but my wealth and your love."

"How much money have you really got?" she whispered. "Are you richer than ——?" and she named a well-known American millionaire. I laughed.

"I have nearly two hundred million pounds," I replied, "and am richer than the ten richest men in the world put together."

She opened her dear eyes wide at the mention of the amount. It seemed nothing to me, who could so easily have had a hundred times as much again.

"Two hundred million pounds," she murmured in a frightened voice. "Oh, it is terrible. Whatever will you do with it all?"

"Shake the tree of the world," I cried, "till all the plums fall into our mouths. But we won't talk of money, sweetheart. I am sick of the sight of gold. I am hungry for love. Our marriage. It shall take place in two months' time. I only live for that day."

And for the moment I spoke the truth. The intoxicating beauty of the woman I loved had stupefied all the other thoughts in my brain. I had cheated myself of

love too long, and now it had seized me body, mind, and soul. The power of it was fiercer than the lust of gold. I clasped Mary Playle in my arms and, straining her close to me, covered her face with kisses.

"So long as I have you, darling," I murmured, "I want nothing else in this world."

She broke from me pale and trembling, and almost terrified at the violence of my passion. And then we sat, hand in hand, and talked of the glorious future till Billy Playle returned. He greeted me with a look of pleasure and then disappeared into the back of the house.

"I want to see your uncle, dearest," I said, as he closed the door behind him. "Let us say good-night before he returns." I clasped her in my arms and held her close to me.

"You will come and see me often now," she whispered.

"Every day, my darling," I replied. "Good-night, my own dear sweetheart."

"Good-night," she said softly, and our lips met in a passionate kiss. Then the handle of the door clicked. Billy Playle entered, and his niece, with a smile and a formal good-night, left the room.

Then I told Playle all that had happened to me the night before.

He listened in silence.

"You're well out of it," he said when I had finished. "You may thank your lucky stars, you may, that Loring robbed you. I told you they'd never rest till they got back their own. Well, it's all over now, and you'll let things be."

"Of course Loring's murderer must be found," I replied. "I have myself offered a reward of £20,000."

"You have, have you?" he said, glancing at me suspiciously. "You don't feel much about Loring's death, do you?"

"No," I answered firmly, "but the money is nothing to me, and I'm convinced that, if we find this man, we shall get at some explanation of Sir Gilbert's death."

"Mebbe," said Playle, "though I ain't sure that he's dead yet. You can never be sure that a man's dead till you see his corpse. Well, I hope they'll catch the fellow, and I'd like to have the killing of him, I would. He shouldn't die in an hour, no, nor yet in a day neither."

A horrible expression came into the man's hideous face, and I knew that he was thinking of his brother's death and of his own maimed and scarred body.

"Well, good-night, Playle," I said, rising to my feet. He looked at me hard with his keen blue eyes.

"You ain't fretting about the loss of that thing, are you?" he said abruptly.

"Of course not," I replied sharply. "Didn't I tell you that I was about to throw it into the sea when it was taken from me?"

"Yes, yes, I know," he said, "but you'd sworn your oath. And folks do repent of their oath sometimes, even if they ain't mean enough to break their sworn word. I've heard of folks changing their minds, I have. Well, good-night, Sir Harry."

"Good-night," I said angrily, "and don't run away with the impression that I am a child, Playle."

I left the room and made my way back to Trunions. Playle's words had stung me to the quick. Of course I was not fretting about the loss of the globe. Certainly I had worried a little about it as I walked over to Standing-hoe. But now my love for Mary Playle had thrust it from my mind. I had come to my senses. I saw things in a clear light. I had more money than I knew what to do with, and I had the love of a sweet and beautiful woman. What more could a man want in this world?

Yet that night, as I sat in the library after dinner and wove happy dreams of the future, a small dark cloud crept up on my mental horizon. At first it was merely a vague sense of loss, such as might occur to a man who looks across a landscape and cannot find some detail to which he has been accustomed all his life. Then by degrees it defined itself into the loss of the yellow box and its contents. As soon as it assumed a definite form, I thrust it from my mind with a laugh and turned my thoughts to love.

But in a little while it returned again, and I drove it back once more into the darkness from which it came. But it returned again and yet again, and though I was strong enough to prevent it from dwelling more than an instant in my thoughts, it returned each time with renewed vigor, and each time it left a deeper impression on my brain. At last it assumed such gigantic proportions that I found I could not battle with it, and it rose like a huge black cloud and blotted out all the sunshine of my love.

I rose to my feet and stared round the room with

horror in my eyes, as though I had suddenly realized the presence of some unseen and terrible foe. I could fight with the things of this world, with those who sought my life, with those who lay in wait for me in the darkness. But here was an elusive phantom of the brain, an enemy within the gates of my own mind, a foe that strove to drive me to do the very thing that love and honor cried out against. I staggered forward to the mantelpiece and, clutching the photograph of Mary Playle, gazed long and earnestly at it as though in the hope that it would give me strength.

But the sight of that lovely face did not fill the aching void in my heart. A terrible sense of desolation blotted out the features of the woman I loved. I felt as though something had been taken from my life that was more precious than life itself. I knew well enough what had happened. The lust of gold had returned to me, the desire for limitless wealth. The power had gone, but the desire remained.

I went to a side table, poured myself out a stiff dose of whiskey, and drained it in a single gulp. Then my foot touched something on the floor. It was a volume of the encyclopædia. I kicked it into a corner, then groveled on my knees and picked it up. Then I turned over the pages till I reached Styria. Then I closed it with a bang and hurled it clean through the glass of the window.

"I am going mad," I cried; "I am going mad," and draining another glass of whiskey and water, I went up to bed, hoping to find security in sleep. But even in my

dreams the phantom flitted to and fro, and all through the night I was mocked by gorgeous visions of gold.

The history of the next month is the history of a struggle which I cannot accurately describe, because to this very day I am ignorant of the precise nature of my adversary. Before a week had passed, however, I realized that I was in the grip of some stupendous power that directed my mind against all the efforts of my will.

Faithful to my promise, I met Mary Playle each day, and for a time, while I was in her presence, love rose triumphant over everything. But gradually the power of love grew weaker and the lust of gold grew stronger, till there came a day when, even in her very arms, my thoughts turned to the precious globe that I had lost.

From that day I felt that I was a doomed man. I began to devote all my energies to the discovery of the person who had murdered Loring. Night after night I crept about the marshes, with a loaded revolver in each pocket, in the hope that I might come across the tall man with the yellow moon-like face. But I found nothing, save an ever-growing desire for the treasure I had lost.

And night after night I prayed to God to deliver me from temptation, but God did not answer my prayers. I sank slowly down into an abyss of darkness, where the only light came from the hope that I might once more hold the secret of Kiao Lung in my hands.

Then one night the truth was revealed to me, and I saw, as one sees things that the lightning suddenly wrests from the darkness, that the curse of God was upon me. I had meddled with the honest course of nature, and this

was to be my punishment, that I could never leave the thing that I had found, and never cast it from me till the day of my death. And in that hour came to me the recollection of my uncle's conduct. How he had given me the box to throw away and had then recalled me and followed me through the night. How he had, in all probability, met his death in trying to find it. How he had seized on the Christian faith as a rock of refuge, and had prayed to God to deliver him from the desire of riches.

All this I saw, and knew that, if I had cast the globe into a hundred fathoms of water, I should have dived after it to bring it to the surface again. And in the bitterness of this knowledge I sank into the lowest hell of despair.

But on that very night the devil told me to enjoy what lay readiest to my hand, and I wrote a letter to the Duke of Bragues.

CHAPTER XXI

FORESWORN

By this time I thoroughly realized that my desire for wealth had developed into a disease, and a disease for which I could find no remedy. Like the drunkard and the morphomaniac, I had given my desire free rein, and now I found it impossible to check it. I began to suffer all the agonies of a craving that I could not satisfy. I longed for the roar of the white-hot furnaces in the cellars, and for a glimpse of the molten gold. Nothing in all the world seemed to me so precious as the little globe that I had lost.

The same disease has different effects on different people, and in my own particular case the lust of gold was not a mere craving for an accumulation of the precious metal. To store up vast piles of sovereigns in a vault, and let streams of coins run through my fingers did not appeal to me. My uncle had been content to fill the house with golden ornaments, but as far as I could determine, he had made no other use of his wealth. But one of the symptoms of my own case was an inordinate desire for all the power and glory that wealth could purchase. My first act had been to commence the building of a splendid palace, and all along I had flattered my vanity with visions of myself as controller of the money markets of Europe.

Then had come the Duke of Bragues with a proposal that it was impossible for me to accept. At the time of his visit I still had control of myself, and my love for Mary Playle was strong enough to enable me to resist the temptation. But at that time I had not lost the globe, and the means of gratifying my desire was still in my hands. It was not till the globe had been taken from me that I felt the full strength of my lust. As the drunkard, forced into total abstinence, discovers that alcohol is dearer to him than life, and as the morphomaniac, deprived of his drug, suffers all the agonies of the damned, so it was in my case. And it was not till the night that Loring robbed me that I realized all that my gold meant to me. A sudden burst of passionate love had stifled the desire in my heart. And then—the grip had closed and tightened on my whole being, and I had struggled against it in vain.

Day after day the words of the Duke of Bragues had echoed in my brain, and the bait that he had dangled before my eyes glittered more brilliantly every time that I glanced at it. Here was power ready made to my hand, the chance of a lifetime. And hour after hour the poisonous thought worked in my brain, and hour after hour my love for Mary Playle fought against it, and in the end was too weak to prevail.

It was then that I realized that I was in the grip of the same terrible power that had driven my uncle to his death. Perchance it was the curse of God, the punishment for dealing in the devilish mysteries of Kiao Lung. Perchance it was the curse of Kiao Lung himself, the Black

Prophet of the East, whose secret of the manufacture of gold was bound up with the terrible price that men must pay for it. But whatever its origin, it was certain that I was too weak to fight against it. I felt as helpless as a man who has been drugged. All my will power seemed to have vanished, and it was then that I wrote to the Duke of Bragues.

The guardian and adviser of the young Queen of Styria was in his own country, but he must have traveled post-haste to England to see me, for precisely eight days after I posted the letter, he arrived at Trunions.

Our interview was brief and to the point.

"At our last meeting," I said, after we had exchanged greetings, "the Duke of Bragues made a proposal to me which I was not then in a position to accept. I have since given the matter grave consideration and, provided we can agree about the details, I am prepared to consent to the general scheme which was then laid before me."

The Duke's dark face flushed with pleasure, and he held out his hand.

"I congratulate you," he said in his quiet, even voice. "You have solved a problem that has threatened the peace of Europe."

I smiled, and thought it quite as well that the Duke of Bragues did not know what plans I had already made for the future of Styria.

"We will discuss the details later on," I replied. "I cannot at any rate leave England for three months."

As a matter of fact, the date was uncertain, and entirely

beyond my control. I could not leave England till I had found the globe, and provided myself with the means of gratifying the wild ambitions that had suddenly become so dear to me. I had no intention of ruling Styria unless I had unlimited wealth.

"Three months?" said the Duke. "Very well, Sir Harry. There is much to be done before you pay your first visit to Styria; and the marriage could not possibly take place till six months after your introduction to your future wife."

"That would suit me very well," I replied. "Now, as to the publication of the news——"

"Nothing" will be known until you have been to Styria," he replied. "In fact, nothing can be definitely arranged till then. I shall remain in London for the next month. I shall cable your decision to the Secret Council to-night. The Queen will learn of it to-morrow morning. I shall then receive my instructions and call on you again. I will wish you good afternoon, Sir Harry Drew."

I extended my hand, and he bowed so low over it that the movement amounted almost to an act of homage. I experienced a strange thrill of pleasure at this trifling incident. Then he loosed my hand, and his dark eyes scrutinized my face.

"You look ill, Sir Harry," he exclaimed. "You will pardon me saying that a great change has taken place in you since our last meeting. I trust that it is nothing serious."

I laughed, and looked him frankly in the face.

"Nothing at all serious, your Excellency," I replied.

"I have a slight chill, and have not been able to sleep the last night or two, that is all."

But, when the Duke had gone, I crossed the room and looked at myself in the glass. My face was white and drawn, and my eyes glittered with an unnatural light. I had all the appearance of a man who is wasting away in the grip of some terrible disease. I read clearly the writing on my features. They were the outward and visible sign of a shrunken and diseased soul. They were the label God had set on me, whereby men should know me for a thing of shame and dishonor. For one moment I saw myself in the fierce light of truth. I stood cold and naked beneath the eye of my Maker. Then slowly and imperceptibly the warmth of my desire spread over all my being. My cheeks flushed and my hands clenched, and I strode up and down the room like a madman.

"I will be the greatest man in all the world," I muttered to myself, and beside the splendor of that thought all else seemed vague and dark and shadowy as a dream.

I did not call to see Mary Playle that day, nor yet the next, nor yet for a whole week following the visit of the Duke of Bragues. I pleaded illness as an excuse. I was still too great a coward to blurt out the truth. Indeed, I should hardly have known what to say, even if I had had the moral courage to say it. It would have been false to say "I do not want to marry you." It would have been equally false to say "It is impossible for me to marry you." Perhaps the truth lay half way between these two phrases. I wanted to marry Mary Playle, but some

power over which I had no control was forcing me to desire something which rendered our marriage impossible, and that desire was stronger even than my love.

Small wonder that I was unable to find words which would explain the situation.

No delicate or well-chosen phrases could hide the one essential fact. In plain English, I was going to behave like a d——d blackguard.

My absence brought forth a string of pathetic little letters from Mary Playle.

I sent word that I was too ill to see her, and told her the lie again and again.

I confined myself to the house to give color to the falsehood. Ill I was in very truth, but it was a disease of heart and brain.

It was impossible, however, to act my part of invalid for any length of time. I wanted to continue my search for the man who had murdered Loring. I had much to do before I went to Styria. My restless fevered brain chafed under the enforced idleness.

The situation had to be faced some day, and the sooner it was over the better. Hour after hour I sat with pencil and paper drafting letters to Mary Playle and tearing them up as soon as they were finished. And then one night, as I lay awake, an idea occurred to me, an idea so devilish in its cruelty and so vile in its lying infamy, that it could only have been conceived by a man lost to all sense of honor and decency.

The next morning I sent for Dr. Joyce. I stayed in bed and he came to me in my bedroom.

"I'm ill, doctor," I said. He looked at my haggard face, felt my pulse, told me to put out my tongue, took my temperature, and sounded me.

"Run down," he said. "Feverish. There's a look in your eye I don't like," and, turning up the lid, he examined the white of the eyeball.

"H'm," he said after a pause, "I'd rest your brain a bit if I were you. A change'd do you good."

"I'm going away for the winter," I replied. "Do you know Styria?"

"Only by reputation. I recommend it sometimes to patients. The air is magnificent in the northern part of the mountains. It's the fashion now to send consumptives there for the winter."

"Precisely," I replied. "That is why I am going there."

"My dear Sir Harry," he exclaimed with a laugh, "there's nothing wrong with your lungs."

"Oh, yes, there is," I said gravely. "My grandfather died of consumption."

"I've just sounded you," he replied, "and I assure you that you are all right."

"Look here, Joyce," I said in a low voice, "just listen to me for a moment. I am, as a matter of fact, going out to Styria on a diplomatic and financial mission of the gravest importance. To ensure the success of this mission it is absolutely necessary that people should think that I am a consumptive going out in search of health. I want you to tell every one that I am a consumptive."

"I'm afraid, Sir Harry," he replied stiffly, "that you have erroneous ideas as to the duties of a doctor."

"Don't be a fool," I rejoined sharply. "A doctor's duty is to ease pain, and incidentally, quite incidentally, to earn his living. I am not asking you to give an invalid a clean bill of health, a request which generally indicates some fraudulent motive. I am merely asking you to say that I am in a rapid decline."

Dr. Joyce shook his head and was silent. I drew my check book out of my pocket and tore off a check which I had already filled in.

"Here," I said slowly, "is a check which will provide you with a handsome income for the rest of your life. All I ask in return is that you shall confirm a statement I am about to make to the effect that I am in consumption. If it is subsequently proved that I am perfectly well, you have merely to confess that you were mistaken. Similar mistakes occur every day in the medical world, and it is no uncommon thing for two doctors of the highest eminence to hold precisely opposite opinions about a patient's health."

I held out the check and he took it from my fingers. As he glanced at the amount his eyes flashed and his hand trembled. The check was for £50,000.

"I cannot refuse it," he said in a low voice. "I am a poor man, and after all it is a small thing that you ask. I cannot refuse it, and yet ——"

I looked at his face and saw honesty battling with the greed of gold. I had seen it before—in my own looking-glass. I had no fear of the result.

"Swear to me," I said, "that you will do as I wish and the check is yours. Don't be misled by the magnitude of the sum to suppose that you are being bribed to commit a crime. The sum is nothing to me, and part of it is in recognition of your services to my workmen."

"I swear to do what you wish," he replied, "and thank you for your—for your generosity."

He left the room, and I laughed softly to myself. How easy it was for a rich man to purchase anything in the world.

Yet if Dr. Joyce had known for what purpose I had bought his word, I think he would, poor as he was, have returned the check; or else if he had taken it, his conscience would have so condemned him that he would, like Judas, have gone out into the darkness and hanged himself.

CHAPTER XXII

THE PARTING

THAT same evening I wrote a pathetic little note to Mary Playle. It was as follows:—

“DEAREST:—I have bad news for you. We shall both of us need all our strength. Please meet me to-morrow at five o’clock by the gate where I first told you of my love. I must see you.

“Your devoted and sorrowful lover,

“HARRY.

After a long struggle with myself I had decided to meet Mary and tell her the lie with my own lips. I was sorely tempted to write my message, tell her that it would be better for us never to meet again, and then leave the district without another word. But a faint splash of honor still glimmered in the foul night of my shame. And a small voice, almost drowned by the deafening clamor of wealth and ambition, still whispered to me that perhaps the sight of her would turn me from my purpose.

The truth was that I had yet sufficient sense of right and wrong to wish to do that which was right, even though I had not the strength to do it. There were still times—brief intervals in my madness—when I realized the horror of my position and looked round wildly for some helping hand to drag me out of the mire into which

I had fallen. It was in one of these intervals that I wrote to my sweetheart asking for an appointment. It was characteristic of the extraordinary state of my mind at this time, that, though I was going to meet her with the express intention of carrying out the foulest deception that any man could practice on a woman, yet there was a sub-conscious hope in my heart that the sight of her would turn me from my purpose.

I reached our trysting place at half-past four. Before I left Trunions I drank nearly half a tumbler of neat brandy, but the fiery spirit was not strong enough to bring a flush into my white and haggard cheeks. My purpose was firm and unshaken, and as I made my way to the road leading to the Lower Cant Farm I was thinking less of the difficult interview I had before me than of the glorious prospects that the future dangled before my eyes.

Even the spirit of the place was powerless to move me from the course that I had marked out for myself. It was a glorious evening, and I was alone in the silence of the marshes. I was standing in the very spot where I had first told Mary Playle of my love. The towering hedge, the gray weather-beaten gate, the stretch of grassy road, the chimneys of the farmhouses in the distance were all so many landmarks in my life. It was a scene that had implanted itself in my memory for all time. Yet the effect on me was precisely the opposite to what I had hoped for when I wrote the letter. The familiarity of the scene irritated me, and I wished that I had chosen another place for our meeting.

So strong was this feeling of annoyance that, when I at last saw the lithe and supple figure of Mary Playle moving along the bank, I left the gate and went to meet her. It was an act of pitiable weakness. I was casting away a weapon that might have served me well. I was like a soldier who throws down his arms at the feet of his conquerors.

I met my sweetheart on the bank by the sea. She looked pale and frightened, and held out her hand. I thrust it aside and took her in my arms. She freed herself from my embrace. Perchance there was something in my face that terrified her. The devil had already set his mark on my features.

"Are you better?" she asked anxiously. "What has been the matter with you? What is the meaning of your letter? It has frightened me."

"Let us sit down," I asked gravely. "Here at the bottom of the bank, where no one can see us. I have much to say to you, sweetheart."

"Why not by the gate?" she asked nervously. "You told me to meet you there, and I thought—well, you know the place is very dear to me."

"It is dear to me also," I said mechanically, "so dear that I cannot say good-bye to you on the spot where I first told you of my love."

"Say good-bye?" she echoed.

"Yes," I replied; "but let us sit down," and, taking her by the arm, I led her gently to the bottom of the grassy bank.

She staggered as though she would have fallen, and her

face was white as death. The sight should have moved me to pity, but it caused me a pang of annoyance. I wished that I had written my message.

"Mary, dearest," I said in a voice that would have done credit to the finest actor in the world, "I have been ill—very ill."

She laid one of her hands on mine and looked into my face with tears in her loving eyes.

"You look ill, dear," she said tenderly, "but you are better now. You are able to get out again."

"I am no better," I replied. "I came out because I wished to see you. I have terrible news for you—terrible for both of us. You must be strong and brave, Mary, darling."

"What has happened?" she asked, clinging to my arm. "What is it, my dear lover?"

And there, with a hard, set face and bloodshot eyes, and words that must have been coined in the lowest depths of hell, I told her the lie that I had devised in my black heart; a lie so foul that I cannot even now write the words that conveyed it to her ears.

She listened to me in silence, and, when I had finished, she looked me bravely in the face.

"It is impossible, Harry," she said in a low, strained voice. "Dr. Joyce is mistaken."

I was silent, and looked out across the sea. A check for £50,000 seemed to flap and writhe on the horizon like a banner of blood-red flame.

"You must go to some other doctor," she said; "some great specialist. And even if it is true——" Her voice

faltered and she stopped. Then she flung her arms round my neck and sobbed passionately,

"I will not give you up," she cried, "even if it is true; I will not give you up. I will nurse you and help you to fight against it, and together we will conquer. And I will pray—I will pray—I will pray."

Her lips moved as though in silent prayer. The thrill from her trembling body ran through every vein and nerve of my own. I clasped her in my arms and kissed her passionately. A wave of triumphant love swept through my whole being, and blotted out everything save the fact that this woman was in my arms and that she was mine. For one brief moment everything was forgotten save love.

My vile purpose shrank back into the darkness. The tears rolled down my cheeks—tears of shame, of penitence, of misery for the pain I had given this tender and faithful woman. I could not speak, though words trembled on my lips.

Then I suddenly rose to my feet with a cry of agony, and stretched out my hands to heaven.

"Save me, dear God," I cried aloud; "deliver me from the body of this death."

It was the last cry of a despairing soul. But there came no answer to it. For one brief moment love had triumphed. Then it sank into a sea of darkness, and the waves of evil danced and splashed over its grave. The fight was over.

I dropped my arms to my side, and felt that I had made a fool of myself, that I had given way to an un-

seemly burst of emotion. Mary Playle still sat on the bank, her face buried in her hands. She had, of course, misinterpreted my appeal to heaven. She would naturally suppose that I had cried out for deliverance from the clutches of my disease. I reseated myself by her side.

"We must be brave," I said in a calm voice. "We must look this thing fairly and squarely in the face. It is no good either of us giving way to our feelings. One thing is certain. Marriage is impossible."

"No, no," she cried. "I am willing to marry you, whatever happens."

"It would be criminal," I replied in a firm voice. "It would be immoral. I look upon the man who perpetuates his own disease in the world as little short of a murderer. No, we must part, my dear sweetheart. The doctor has ordered me to Styria for the winter. I shall leave England very shortly. But I shall say good-bye now. I cannot trust myself to see you again. I am too weak. I scarcely dare to kiss your lips. I must leave you now."

She looked up at me with pleading eyes, like some animal that has been stricken to death by its master. But the power of love had been shattered. So strong had my purpose become since its few moments of weakness that I dared to look her in the face and act my despicable part with perfect skill.

"We must do what is right," she said with a shudder.

"Yes, dear heart," I answered, "we must do what is right. We ——"

But why should I prolong this sickening scene. I have told so much in order that the shame of it may bite deeper

into my soul, and that all who read may curse me. But I will draw a veil over the rest. I have told enough for all men to know how vile a thing a fellow man can be. Yet, perhaps there are some who will pity me, for I swear that on that summer evening I had no proper control over my words or actions. I was in the grip of some power that I could not fight against. It had taken possession of me body and soul. It spoke with my lips, it looked through the windows of my eyes, it caressed with my hands. It was a lying spirit, cloaked with tenderness and masked with honest love.

I remained with Mary Playle for nearly an hour—a hypocrite playing with the love of a tender-hearted woman. How I wept and prayed, and cursed the cruel fate that had destroyed our happiness. I played my part to perfection, or something within me was playing the part for me. For the most horrible feature of the whole business was that I still loved Mary Playle, and that, in spite of my love, I was willing and able to carry out all the details of my foul plot.

At last, however, the miserable tragedy came to an end. I stood alone on the bank by the sea. The farewell kiss had been given. The farewell words had been spoken. Yet neither lingered in my memory. I felt no sorrow for what had happened. On the contrary, I was glad that I had succeeded in accomplishing my purpose and that a trying interview had come to an end. I was free, and I gloried in the shame of my freedom.

The sun had disappeared behind a bank of clouds in the west, and the shadow of night was already creeping

up from the sea. I was close to Standinghoe, for I had accompanied Mary Playle to within a few hundred yards of her home, and the sound of men's voices, the rattle of an anchor chain, and the creaking of a block came to my ears. The little village itself looked dull and forbidding in the gray light. I watched Mary Playle's white figure disappear round the corner of a black timbered cottage. She did not look back. She had crept away from me like some wounded animal. All the spring of life had gone out of her motion. I gave a sigh of relief when she had disappeared. I was glad that she had not looked back.

I turned sharply on my heel and walked towards Trunions. The action was symbolical of my new life. I had turned my back on Standinghoe and all that it meant to me forever. I had concluded an important episode in my life.

In the distance the white walls of my new palace looked like some ghostly rampart frowning over the marshland. In a sense it represented the new phase of my career. It was, so far, the only substantial result of my newly acquired wealth. Yet now, for all practical purposes, it was useless. I should never live in it, and no person in their senses would ever rent it from me. It was so much waste of money, but when I had left England, it would remain as a memorial of my existence. Perchance in time to come it would be known to the country folk as "Drew's Folly," and men would point to its empty walls and barren magnificence as an example of how a fool may spend his money.

But to me, as I walked towards it in the twilight, it was but the shadow of another and a fairer building. I saw, as in a vision, the great marble palace of Viera, stretched along its rocky height like a silver cloud, so vast that it seemed like a town in itself, and so beautiful that it was the wonder and envy of every monarch in Europe.

Then I looked at the marshes and the sea. How flat and uninteresting they seemed in the twilight; how different to the snow capped mountains and green valleys of Styria. I should be glad to leave them. For years their loneliness and monotony had cast a gloom on my life. Yet I could not leave them till I found the small green globe that now represented all my hopes of happiness.

When I reached Trunions, I had dinner. Before I had finished my coffee, the footman entered and handed me a card. It bore the name of Mr. William Rosick, private enquiry agent.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LUST OF BLOOD

I HAD no wish to meet Rosick. We had parted on unfriendly terms, and I suspected that he knew more about me than he chose to reveal. He had, however, the reputation of being one of the three smartest detectives in England, and it was just possible that he might be useful to me in the matter that lay nearest to my heart. I conquered my dislike of the man and told the servant that I would see him in the library.

I finished my coffee, lit another cigarette, and strolled into the room in a manner meant to suggest that I took no interest whatever in Mr. Rosick's visit. He was standing, hat in hand, in the middle of the floor, and he bowed respectfully as I entered.

"Good-evening, Mr. Rosick," I said with a smile. "Won't you sit down?"

"Good-evening, sir," he replied, taking a seat on a very straight-backed chair. "Quite like old times, isn't it, sir?"

"Will you have a smoke?" I said, ignoring his remark and handing him my cigar box.

"Thank you, sir," he replied, carefully selecting a cigar and feeling it with the air of a connoisseur. I handed him the matches, and, when he had lit up, he stared at the carpet and smoked thoughtfully.

"Good cigar this," he said after a pause, "and if I may

say so, sir, without offense, a very different cigar to those you used to smoke. They were good, but this—I used to be in the trade, sir, and know what this is.”

“I am in different circumstances now, Mr. Rosick,” I replied coldly. “You probably are aware of that?”

He laughed as if I had perpetrated a capital joke.

“That’s a nice house you’re building, sir,” he said with a grin.

“A very nice house,” I replied. “Would you like to take it? I am going abroad for the winter.”

“Abroad for the winter,” he said. “Well, I’m glad I called before you left, sir.”

“What have you called about?” I asked abruptly. “Have you found out anything about my uncle’s death?”

“I’ve called in answer to your advertisement, sir,” he answered. “You have, I believe, offered a reward of £20,000 to any one who finds the man that killed Loring?”

“That is so. Have you found him?”

“I have not,” he replied, “but I shall certainly do so within a week from to-day.”

“Within a week from to-day,” I repeated slowly; “are you sure?”

“A week from to-day,” he continued, “I shall call on you and ask you for your check for £20,000.”

“I would rather pay you the £40,000,” I replied.

“Precisely. But I am not certain that I can recover what you have lost. There is, of course, a chance, but it is a remote one.”

"You have a clue to the man's whereabouts?"

"I have been here for a week," he replied, "and I have not been idle. Other men have been far afield in their search. A flat piece of marshland, where even a rabbit would find some difficulty in evading pursuit, did not appeal to them. But I suspected and now I know that the murderer is not far from this very house. I have drawn in my net foot by foot. I have not found him, but I know that his hiding place is within a certain area, which, roughly speaking, is about a square mile in extent. So far he has eluded me, but I have him here—in my hand," and he stretched out his thick muscular fingers to emphasize his words. I rose to my feet and lit a cigar with trembling fingers.

"Look here, Mr. Rosick," I said with assumed calmness. "I don't care a rap about the fellow that murdered Loring. It doesn't matter to me whether he swings or not. But I must have the little metal globe that I have lost. I must have it. Do you understand?"

"I'll do my best, sir," he replied. "I wish you'd have been more frank with me at first. I'd have had the whole case well in hand a month ago. As it is I have had to pick up a dozen threads. But I have most of them in my fingers now, and when I find the murderer of William Loring I will get at the bottom of the whole business."

"My uncle's death?"

"Yes, and all that followed it. Well, you'll excuse me, sir, but I must be going. I have a lot to do to-night."

"You are well armed, I suppose?"

He patted the two side pockets of his coat.

"I've been on these jobs before," he said. "Good-night, sir." We shook hands and he left the room. And, as I sat alone in my library, I thought very favorably of Mr. Rosick. He had all the qualities which I lacked, patience, perseverance, and untiring energy. I looked upon him as my bloodhound, moving silently towards its human prey. And for the moment my whole future seemed to depend on his skill and courage. I had an idea that, if he failed, I should never again set eyes on the treasure that was dearer to me than my life.

Five days afterwards I received another visit from the Duke of Bragues. He told me that the secret council of Styria and the Queen herself were gratified at my decision, and that my visit to the country in three months' time would be agreeable to all parties concerned.

"I must, however, impress upon you," he said with a smile, "that the whole business will have to be carried out with much care and delicacy. It is of the utmost importance that our two great neighbors should know nothing of the affair till the engagement is actually announced. It is suggested that you visit Styria as an ordinary tourist."

"I have in a measure anticipated your wishes," I replied, and I told him of my deal with Dr. Joyce. He laughed heartily.

"Capital, Sir Harry," he cried. "Nothing could be better. And what an advertisement for the country as a health resort. The poor consumptive cured in a month, eh?"

I did not smile in answer to his burst of merriment. For one brief moment I saw the white agonized face of Mary Playle. I repented of nothing that I had done, but I could not treat it as a joke.

"Now as to the Styria five per cent. bonds," he continued. "We have the option of redeeming them at par, but, as they stand at about half their face value, it would be waste of money for us to do so. You had better buy them yourself."

"Certainly. But it will be a big operation, and I shall have to start at once. I expect even then that I shall run the price up above par."

"Well, if you don't mind, I should like you to start at once."

"What about security?" I asked, with a swift glance of suspicion.

"The bonds at their present price are good security. It is most important that you should buy them yourself. If we started to redeem them on a large scale, it would excite suspicion."

"I can believe it," I answered drily. "The spectacle of Styria redeeming a hundred million pounds worth of bonds at par would stagger the whole of Europe."

"Oh, we are not so bad as all that," he said with a smile. "But if you will commence to buy, slowly and secretly, you will earn the gratitude of the whole nation."

"Very well," I replied. "I suppose you don't intend to leave me in the lurch when I have finished the financial part of the business. I am not a philanthropist

doling out charity to a sick nation. I've my own axe to grind in the matter."

"Of course," he said gently; "of course, Sir Harry. But my word of honor is sufficient for you, I trust?"

"The word of the Duke of Bragues," I replied with a bow, "is sufficient for anybody."

"Well, that is settled," he said, "and I can look to you ——"

He stopped. A sudden crash, and noise of voices in the hall diverted his attention.

"I can look to you to be as secret as possible?" he continued. Then the door suddenly burst open, and a huge unwieldy figure limped into the room.

It was Billy Playle. His eyes were bloodshot, and his hideous face was convulsed with fury.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Playle?" I said sternly. "Didn't my servant tell you I was engaged?"

"Engaged or no," the man answered, "I've got to see you, I have, and I means to see you; and here I stay until I does see you."

"I must apologize," I said, turning to the Duke of Bragues.

"I have nothing more to say," he replied courteously. "I will leave you, unless, indeed, you would rather not be left alone with this man."

"I can take care of myself," I said, ostentatiously slipping my hand into my pocket and showing the butt of a revolver. "I am sorry this has occurred. Allow me to see you to your carriage."

In a minute I had seen the Duke depart and closed the hall door. When he had departed, I returned to the library and closed the door. Playle was still standing in the same place. I passed him and seated myself at my desk.

"Now, then, Playle," I said, "sit down and say what you have to say. I can spare you just five minutes," and taking out my watch I placed it on the desk before me.

"I'll stand, thank you," he replied, "and what I have to say can be said in less than five minutes. It's about my gal—I call her mine, for she's all I've got. You've broken her heart, and she's like to die, she is. You've got to marry her. She's crazy for love of you, and she'll die if you give her up. We've had the doctor in the house—Dr. Joyce."

I started at the name. Was it possible that Dr. Joyce had betrayed me?

"If you had Dr. Joyce," I said, calmly enough, "you probably asked him about my own state of health, and you must see that it would be criminal for me to marry any one."

"Well, you've got to marry my niece," he said doggedly, "if you die within the year. She's willing enough; she'll take you just as you are."

"For my money, I suppose?" I said with a sneer; "and the sooner I die, the better, eh?"

Playle did not answer, but I could see that the cowardly insult had struck home. His eyes flashed and his great gnarled body shook like some oak quivering from root to twig in the shock of an earthquake.

"I am not scoundrel enough," I continued, "to bring children into the world that are doomed to suffering and early death before they are born, to infect, perchance, my wife with my own disease, to——"

"Stow your talk," shouted Playle, clenching his fists. "Stow your cursed talk. It's all words, it is. Do you take me for a fool, Sir Harry? D'you think I don't know as how you're as well and strong as a man can be. My gal's not good enough for you, that's the honest truth of it. You're puffed up with your gold, and you've decided to chuck her. You think she ain't a fit mate for the richest man in the world. And you've broke her heart, you have. But I tell you, Sir Harry——"

"Stop, Playle," I said sternly. "You don't know what you are saying. Surely I suffer enough without having to endure this sort of talk from you. Is it not sufficient that I have been condemned to death—that I cannot marry the woman I love."

I spoke with feeling, and the tears came into my eyes. It was a beautiful piece of play-acting. But I did not realize what manner of man I had to deal with. Playle laughed, and came within an arm's length of me.

"Aye, you will suffer," he said. "God will take care of that. Maybe, you'll learn what happiness the devil's money will bring. You will suffer, you damned scoundrel."

"Playle," I cried in amazement. "You forget yourself. Will you kindly go? I don't think you are yourself. How dare you use such words to me?"

"I have my warrant here, I have," he muttered, and

feeling in his pocket, he brought out a greasy, worn pocketbook, and fumbling in it for a few seconds, produced a piece of pink paper. He unfolded it, and held it up before my eyes. It was the check I had given Dr. Joyce!

"This here's the warrant for my words," he said. "Check for £50,000. Pretty fee for a doctor, ain't it? The sort of fee a man would give out of sheer gratitude for having received his sentence of death."

"How did you come by that check?" I asked sternly.

The devil was giving me strength to brazen the matter out. I looked Playle straight in the face, and did not flinch from the fury of his eyes.

"Doctor left his pocketbook behind," he replied curtly. "I'd looked at him pretty closely, I had, when I asked him about your illness. His face gave it away, and I knew that he'd been lying, I did. And when he left this behind I took the liberty of having a look at the inside, and I found this. The whole game's plain enough to me now."

"It's a pity you didn't ask Dr. Joyce about it," I said calmly. "It's a check I promised him for a hospital, and if I were you, I'd return it as soon as possible, or you may be suspected of stealing it."

For a moment he did not answer, but his keen eyes seemed to search my very soul. Then he folded up the check, put it in the pocketbook, and placed the greasy case in his pocket. Then he looked at me with a contemplative smile.

"You're a liar, you are," he said, as calmly as a judge

delivering sentence on a prisoner. "You're a black-hearted liar. But your secret is safe with me. My gal must never know. It's better for her to think of you as a dying man than to know you for what you are. She's well rid of you, she is. Young Jack Outen has returned, and for all your gold he's worth a dozen of such as you. She'll marry him when you show your hand. I don't know your game, but I do know that you are a damned scoundrel, and that I'm going to thrash you within an inch of your life."

As he uttered his last few words, he hit out at me so swiftly and suddenly, that I was taken completely off my guard, and only half parried a blow that nearly stunned me. Before I could recover from its effects, he had whipped the revolver out of my pocket and transferred it to his own.

"Now, then, Sir Harry," he shouted, "if you are a man, stand up to me. Don't hurry. I'd like to start fair with you. I only let out so quick to get your pistol. Take your time, Sir Harry, take your time."

He turned his back on me, and, slouching over to the door, locked it.

Then he returned and faced me with clenched fists. The sting of his blow had roused my blood, and I was ready to meet him. He had twice my strength, but I guessed that I had more than twice his skill. I was, moreover, a young and active man, while he was so bent and crippled that he could only move but slowly. I was no coward—physically, at any rate—and I resolved to give this rough fisherman a lesson that

would teach him not to interfere with the plans of his betters.

"If you want to fight," I said grimly, "you shall have as much as you want." Then I took off my coat, turned up my sleeves, and went for him.

For the first few minutes he was practically at my mercy. I moved round him and planted my blows almost exactly where I wished. I cut his face, blacked his eyes, and hammered his body to my heart's content. Only one of his blows got home, but that gave me a foretaste of what I might expect if I was not skilful enough to avoid them. It caught me on the right shoulder and for nearly a minute I could not use my right arm.

So far I had acted entirely as the aggressor, but the result was not encouraging. I had inflicted enough damage to have knocked out any ordinary man. But Playle, to use a common but expressive sporting phrase, had "come up smiling." His hideous face was blotched and smeared with blood, but he breathed quietly and showed no signs of distress. For all practical purposes I might as well have battered an oak tree. My wrists and arms were sore, and my hands were bleeding. I resolved to confine my attention to his heart.

But Playle, whether from instinct or from some elementary knowledge of boxing, kept his right hand close to the one vulnerable point in his iron frame, and the second round was even more unsatisfactory than the first. My adversary contrived to plant a terrible blow on my ribs, which nearly knocked all the breath out of my

body, and for some time I had only the strength to keep out of his reach. Moreover, he had twice tried to close with me, and I knew that, if he once got his powerful arms about my body, he could do what he pleased with me. On each occasion I had tried to drive him off with my fists, but had been eventually compelled to spring out of his reach.

At the end of half an hour I began to realize that I was beaten, unless I could get in a knock out blow within the space of a few minutes. My strength was failing, and I found that I was being forced to act on the defensive. I was out of condition, for late hours and sleepless nights and want of exercise had already begun to tell on my constitution. The sweat poured off me, and I gasped for breath. My blows began to fall less frequently, and I spared my strength. I realized that I should want all my powers of endurance before I had finished.

I was practically untouched, and my opponent's face was horribly disfigured, but for all that I knew that I was nearly at the end of my tether, and that the unwieldy figure, which I slashed and battered at my will, was still undaunted and ready to take all the punishment that I could give him. Billy Playle treated my blows as though they had been the strokes of a feather. More than once the thought flashed through my mind that this man had been through the hands of Chinese torturers, and that the mere blow of a fist was nothing to his gnarled and twisted frame.

At last the end came. The sight of his hideous face and huge deformed body began to prey on my nerves,

and I attacked him with such a sudden burst of fury that I sent him staggering back to the wall, which alone saved him from falling to the ground. But I exhausted my failing strength in this final effort ; it was the last flicker of an expiring flame. The swift succession of blows slowed down and died away in a last feeble left hander. I stepped back, utterly played out and gasping for breath. I saw the light come into my opponent's eyes. He knew that I was a beaten man.

Slowly and steadily he shuffled from the wall and followed me as I retreated round the room. I quailed before the look on his ugly face. I felt weak and helpless as a child. He forced me into a corner, and his great hairy fist crashed through my guard and lighted on my forehead. I reeled back to the wall and he hit me again and again with such force that I felt as though he were driving me into the very stone itself. The whole room swam in a mist of blood. I could not see him. He was like some terrible and invisible force beating me down into a bottomless pit. I cowered with my arms before my face. He spoke to me, but I could not hear what he said. His voice sounded like a distant echo. Then suddenly there was a flare of blinding light, and then—darkness.

* * * *

When I came to my senses, I found myself lying on the floor close to the wall. Playle had departed and I was alone. I ached in every limb, and I saw the room through a red mist. I clutched hold of the desk and pulled myself to my feet. The furniture seemed to be



I reeled back to the wall and he hit me again and again.

circling round me, and I concentrated all my will power in a supreme effort to keep it from drawing me into its vortex.

Gradually the mist cleared and I dragged myself to a small cupboard in the wall. I opened it with trembling fingers and took out a bottle of brandy. I pulled out the cork and, placing the bottle to my lips, took a long draught of raw spirit. Then I reeled across to the sofa, and flinging myself on the soft cushions, stared up at the ceiling.

And, as I lay there, I slowly realized that some change had taken place in my nature, that something was different, that the aspect of things was different, that some new power was moulding my thoughts. Love had been buried in a stream of gold. And now the gold itself seemed less important than some new desire which had forced itself into my brain. For a while my dazed thoughts refused to define this new thing that had come into my life. Then I caught sight of my blood-stained fingers, and, as I raised them to my lips, I knew the horrible truth. The lust of blood had entered into my soul.

I rose to my feet with a cry of rage. I felt like a wounded animal whose sole desire is to rend the hunter. The primæval beast came to the surface through all the veneer of centuries. I bared my teeth and clenched my nails like talons into my palms.

"Let me kill!" I cried aloud in my bestial fury. "Let me kill—kill—kill!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PIT

My revolver was on the desk. Playle had been thoughtful enough to leave it behind. I picked it up and handled it lovingly. It was loaded in every chamber, and each cartridge, used with proper care and skill, was good for the life of a man. I went to a drawer and put a dozen more of the small brass tubes in my pocket. It would be poor shooting if I could not kill a man in eighteen shots.

I examined the weapon and polished it gently with my handkerchief. I had never before realized its true value. Hitherto it had been merely a safeguard, a means of defense against real or imaginary enemies. But it had now acquired a new dignity, compared to which its former position seemed mean and paltry. It was the little metal shrine of vengeance, and I almost worshiped its smooth blue barrel. Here, in my hands, was the arbiter of life and death. I raised it to my lips and already, in my imagination, I saw Playle's lifeless body, and the hideous silent face upturned to the sky.

I placed the revolver in my pocket, took a long draught of brandy, and left the house. My brain was in a fever, and my sore and battered body thrilled with excitement. I felt that it would be impossible to sleep that night, impossible to rest until I had accomplished my mission. I

had no thought of the consequences. I only knew that I must kill.

The moon shone brightly in a clear sky overhead, but the sea and marshland were shrouded in mist. Behind the house the fog was luminous and starred with glowing lights, while countless shadowy figures moved to and fro like ghosts. My new palace was still rising foot by foot to the skies.

I left the house and walked towards Standinghoe with no clear purpose in my mind. It was very unlikely that I should encounter Playle at that time of night. But I could not rest. Some invisible power drove me forth from the shelter of my home. Perhaps it was the instinct which teaches wild beasts to roam by night. Perhaps it was a vague hope that I might find the man who had killed Loring. But whatever its origin, it was all-compelling and irresistible. I longed for the night air and the silence. The four walls of a house would have been a prison to me. Like some animal, I found pleasure in creeping through the darkness.

I walked along the bank to Standinghoe, and stood for a few minutes against the wall of Playle's house. All the rooms were in darkness and I could hear nothing but the splash of the waves on the "hard" below. I wondered if he were still awake, and whether Mary Playle were awake, and if so, whether she might be thinking of me. All my love for her seemed to have died out of my heart. She had appeared in a new light—as the cause of her uncle's brutal violence, as the origin of the blood-lust that had entered my soul.

I examined the fastenings of the doors and windows, and then crept silently away from the house. As I passed through the village, a dog barked. I whistled softly, and it came crawling out of the shadow of a garden wall. I knew the animal well: it was a small mongrel terrier that had belonged to Loring. It crept to my feet and whined, with its tail between its legs.

"Good dog," I said softly, "good dog," and, stooping down, I patted it on the head. Then suddenly I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to kill it. I caught the half-starved animal by the throat with one hand, gripped its jaws with the other, and strangled it to death.

When its last convulsive struggles had died away, I rose to my feet and looked at the lifeless little body with a smile of triumph. How easy it was to kill. How delightful to see the work of one's hands. I dropped on one knee and lifted one of the limp little paws. I thought of Playle's great heavy fist, and laughed with pleasure. Then I sprang to my feet and strode away from the small white lump of stiffening flesh.

I left the village behind me, and, instead of walking back towards Trunions, took the path that ran westward along the edge of the creek. I had no particular object in view, and prowled aimlessly along.

Now, as I look back on my actions that night, I realize how stupendous was the power that kept me moving mile after mile through the darkness. My limbs were stiff and bruised, my face was cut and bleeding, my whole body had been battered to a jelly. Yet for all that, I was endowed with a superhuman strength that made light of

pain and fatigue. I moved on and on, from place to place; now walking along the bank, now descending to the edge of the mud on one side, or the edge of the dyke on the other; listening for every sound, peering into the curtain of mist to see if anything else was moving save myself in that silent wilderness of marsh and creek.

Then I heard the report of a shot, and then two more in quick succession, and then a long scream of agony.

I stopped, and taking out my revolver, stared hard at the wall of vapor which surrounded me. I could see nothing. I called out, but no one answered. I could not locate the sounds I had heard, but I calculated that something had happened within a hundred yards of me.

I moved stealthily along the foot of the bank, picking out a smooth path so that even the swish of the grass should not give warning of my approach. The thought struck me that perhaps there was something to kill, and a great joy came into my heart. I had no fear of danger. The hot blood leaped in my veins. If there was fighting, I wanted to be in the thick of it—on either side. The cause did not matter. It was only the opportunity of killing that appealed to me.

I walked along for about fifty yards, and then I saw a dark patch on the grass at the foot of the bank. I stopped and looked at it carefully. It did not move. I advanced towards it, and saw that it was the body of a man lying face downwards.

I came close to it, and turned the face over to the moonlight. The features were horribly crushed and distorted, but I recognized them. The limp mangled thing

that lay at my feet was all that remained of Mr. Rosick, the detective.

"I have the murderer here, in my hand," Rosick had said to me, and again, "I shall certainly find him a week from to-day."

I smiled grimly as I remembered the man's words. It was quite evident that Rosick had been almost too successful in his quest. I stooped down and examined his body. Then I rose to my feet and looked round into the mist, revolver in hand.

It was quite clear to me how the detective had met his death. His crushed and mangled frame told its own story. I recalled the body of the burglar who had been found in the study at Trunions—the limp, distorted limbs huddled and pressed together, the look of terror on the face, and the ghastly bloodlessness of it all. I knew well enough how Rosick had died.

But it was not clear to me how he had allowed himself to be overtaken by his fate. He was well armed and on the alert for danger. He was a shrewd, powerful man, and hardly likely to be caught unawares. I was certain that he had succumbed not to stratagem, but to superior force, and that the snake alone would have met its match in the encounter.

A further investigation confirmed this theory. In one of Rosick's pockets I found a loaded revolver. There were cartridges in all its chambers, and, as I held the barrel up against the moon, I saw that the inside of it was clean and bright. It was clear that the detective had not used this weapon. Yet I could find no other revolver,

though I searched long and diligently over an area of many square yards. But the three shots had undoubtedly been fired by the unfortunate man. He bore no trace of any wound, and I knew, moreover, that when I last saw him he was armed with two revolvers. I asked myself what had become of the other one.

There was only one answer to this question. The revolver had been taken from him. Apart from the fact that I had made a thorough search for it, it was very unlikely that a man who was fighting for his life would fling away one of his weapons. It had undoubtedly been taken from him, and I realized that no snake in all the world could have accomplished such a feat. There were clear traces of a man's handiwork, and I had no doubt that it was the man who had killed Loring.

Then I recalled Rosick's boastful words: "I have drawn in my net foot by foot. I have not found him, but I know that his hiding place is within a certain area, which, roughly speaking, is about a square mile in extent."

I looked round the small white circle which the light of the moon had cut out of the surrounding mist. Was it possible that the detective had run his quarry to earth, and had died in the very hour of his triumph? If so, the secret lay, perhaps, within a few yards of his dead body. It was conceivable that I might carry on the work which the dead man had so nearly brought to a successful conclusion. But, on the other hand, I knew nothing of the mental process by which he had narrowed down the field of his operations, and the final solution of the problem might yet be locked forever in his silent brain.

I sat down on the grass within a few feet of the body and resolved to watch till daylight. I had no fear of falling asleep. My mind was strung up to such a pitch of excitement that I did not even feel tired. The accomplishment of my desire was in sight, and once more the lust of blood had given way to the lust of gold. Wealth, incalculable, stupendous, illimitable, lay somewhere within reach, perhaps less than a stone's throw from where I sat. I could not rest till I had found the man who had killed Loring and Rosick, and forced him to restore the treasure he had stolen from me.

Hour after hour I kept my lonely vigil. The cold night air had no power to chill the fierce fires that blazed within me. The silence, the danger that lurked in the mist, produced no sense of fear in my mind. There was even no regret at Rosick's death, though a few hours before all my hopes had hung on his success. I had taken up the sword from his dead hand. I myself would strike the blow. He had sharpened the weapon. It was left for me to wield it with all the strength of my arm and brain.

The moon sank and I was left in darkness. I did not stir from my place, but strained every nerve to catch the faintest sound from the thick night that enveloped me. Then at last the gloom began to lighten and a faint grayness stole into the black fog. I was seized with a fierce joy. The day was at hand, and the day's work was waiting for me.

The sun rose, red and huge, into the wall of mist. I welcomed it with outstretched arms. I did not see that

it was the angry eye of God piercing all the horrors that the night had veiled.

The mists still lay thick on the marsh, but I knew that the sun would soon disperse them. I rose to my feet and began my search. I had no thought for the dead man. To me he was merely a central point round which to pursue my investigations; save as a mark on the grass, I dismissed him from my thoughts.

I climbed to the top of the bank, which was nearly twelve feet in height. From this point of vantage I could see over the layer of mist that lay upon the water and the marshes. It stretched round me mile after mile like a sea of white foam. I stood in the sunlight under a canopy of blue sky, but at my feet the carpet of vapor hid everything from my sight.

I walked a couple of hundred yards up the side of the creek. Then the bank turned suddenly to the left, and I saw that I had come to one of the numerous little inlets which break the smooth lines of these wide estuaries. As a rule they only run a few hundred yards inland, but the pedestrian has to make a tedious and irritating detour to skirt them. Their narrow mouth is impassable. At high tide it is full of water, and at low tide the surface of the bottom is so thickly covered with slime that a man can only attempt to cross it at risk of his life. The far ends of them afford snug mud berths for yachts in the winter.

As I walked round the inlet, a large black mass loomed out of the mist. I recognized it at once as one of the numerous old hulks which lie rotting in the mud of the creeks. Piteous spectacles they are for the most part,

the carcasses of boats which were once perhaps the pride and joy of the men who sailed in them; some mere ribs and backbone, others clothed with battered and broken planks, but one and all emblems of the indomitable strength of the sea, which grips men and vessels in its iron fingers and leaves only the bones for the sun and winds to laugh at.

There were many such hulks round Standinghoe, and I had often seen this one before. But in the light of recent events it had assumed a new importance. It was not far from Rosick's body, and was a possible hiding place. The marsh and the mud and the water could afford no possible refuge to a man who wished to evade pursuit for any length of time. There were no caves, no woods, no place where any man could conceal himself. But here was at least a break in the surrounding flatness.

I went close to the hulk and examined it carefully. It had been beached at an exceptionally high spring tide, for the sea lavender and glass-wort grew thick round its black timbers, and the last high water mark was several yards away from it. It was an old barge, and time had not yet stripped it of all its planks. Aft it was a mere skeleton, but for'ard the foc's'le still remained intact save for a few gaps in the deck and sides.

I went up to one of these holes and peered into it. Then I remembered that, of course, every one of these hulks had been carefully examined by the police, and probably two or three times over. My uncle's disappearance and Loring's death, together with the huge reward I had offered for the discovery of the murderer,

must have ensured the strictest examination of every inch of ground within several miles of Trunions.

But in spite of the obvious futility of searching over ground that had already been subjected to a fierce and minute scrutiny, I decided to make a personal examination of the hulk. I remembered that chance often throws things in the path of fools, while clever men have searched for them in vain. I went to the after part of the vessel, climbed in through the gaping ribs, and made my way through weeds and rotting timber to the fore bulkhead. I scrambled up this, and lying down on the deck, peered through the hatchway.

The sunlight streamed through the gaping planks and lit up the interior so clearly that I could see every inch of it. The foc's'le was empty, and there was no sign of its having been occupied as a hiding place. The timbers of the flooring were sound and unbroken. The sides, too, were sound enough to a height of four feet. The slime which lay thick over all the rest of the boat's bottom had been kept out by the bulkhead. It was a place where a hunted man might well choose to sleep on an emergency, but there was no trace of any one having been recently in the place.

I let myself down through the hatchway, and then, for the first time, I noticed a peculiar smell, and I had an idea that it was not unfamiliar to me. The sense of smell is a powerful aid to memory, and, after thinking for a few moments, I recalled the time when a similar odor had come to my nostrils. The terrified faces of the workmen, the huge reptile that beat and writhed on the floor, the

dark opening in the wall of the cellar. The whole scene came back to me, and in a flash I realized that the scent was hot, and that somewhere or other within the rotting timbers of this old hulk lay the solution of the problem that had baffled some of the keenest detectives in England.

I continued my search with renewed vigor, and placing my revolver on the floor by my side, I took out a knife and thrust it into the seams of the planking to see if any of them were loose. But the whole woodwork seemed as solid as when it had first been laid down in the builder's yard.

Then suddenly and without even a sound to act as a warning, the whole floor slid from under me. I caught at the edge of a plank, hung there for a second by my hands, and struggled to raise myself so that I could get one elbow over the edge. Then something gripped me by the feet, tore me from my hold, and I dropped down into the darkness.

CHAPTER XXV

THE GOLD WORSHIPER

WHEN I came to my senses, I found myself lying on a cold floor of stone. My hands were tied together with a piece of grass rope, but my feet were free. A couple of yards away from me the dark figure of a tall man squatted on the floor. He was silhouetted against a lamp which stood a little way behind him. The light was dim and I could see nothing else save a faint outline of great baulks of timber which seemed to loom from both roof and walls. I raised myself on one elbow and tried to discern the features of the man who confronted me.

"O most excellent fool," he said abruptly in almost perfect English. The remark called for no answer, and I was silent.

"O most distinguished donkey," he continued. "You have, indeed, nearly bitten through the rope by which you were fastened to the earth."

"Who are you?" I asked in a sullen voice. "Let me see you, damn you."

For reply the man moved the lamp so that the light fell upon his face. I saw that his features were huge and moonlike. Their impassive mask was only brightened by the eyes, which glittered through two narrow slits in the broad slab of flesh. His form was gigantic, and as he squatted on the floor he reminded me of some great heathen idol.

"You are the man who killed Loring," I said slowly.
"Who killed Rosick ; I am glad I have found you."

"O most illustrious fool," he replied, "I am indeed the humble man who has ventured to interfere with the destinies of your noble friends."

"And you intend to kill me, I suppose?"

"Kill?" he said with an impassive smile. "The followers of the great Kiao Lung do not kill any save the meanest of their foes. With so noble and exalted a person as your illustrious self they use persuasion. They teach, they explain, they reason."

"I understand," I said, quietly enough. "They torture to death?"

"Mere pain," he replied ; "a little bodily pain to save the soul from the torment of the seven devils hereafter."

"That is very thoughtful of you," I said with a smile.
"Well, to come to the point, what do you want with me?"

"I did not seek you out," he answered gravely ; "I do not want you. You came of your own free will. You have come, and—you shall stay as my honored guest."

"I do not see how my death or agony will benefit you."

"It will amuse me, most illustrious one."

"Will you let me go," I pleaded, "if I swear not to molest you, or seek for you again?"

"You could not keep the oath," he replied. "The madness of Kiao Lung is upon you. You have tasted the gold fruit, and the lust of blood and gold will be in your heart till you die. That is the curse of Kiao Lung."

I, Min-Shan, the unworthy priest of the Golden Temple, say it, and what I say is truth."

I was silent. The man's words broke in upon my darkened mind like a blinding flash of light. I saw why I could not rest till I had found the globe again. It was no personal weakness of my own will. It was but the fulfilment of the law. All pleasure has its attendant pain. Even ordinary riches seldom bring happiness. And it was clear that the secret of Kiao Lung, which was able to endow a man with fabulous wealth, demanded its own price from the man's nature. With gold it gave also the undying lust for gold, and, perhaps, also the lust of blood, the desire to kill for the mere sake of killing. I had accepted the gift, and must pay the price. I was in the power of forces that I could not fight against. Then I realized that after all it did not matter. For the present I had only to consider how best to escape from the hands of the man who desired to kill me.

"You are mistaken," I said after a long pause. "I have complete control of my own desires. I have wealth enough."

"You are the richest man in the world," he replied, "and yet you desire more gold. I know your desires; I know how you have sought for me—not to avenge the death of your servant, but to recover that which I have taken from you; that which I came to restore to its lawful owners. I know that you will not rest till you have found it. Of what value is your oath to me?"

"You are mistaken," I said firmly. "My uncle was in possession of the secret for years. He conquered the

desire for gold. He died almost penniless. And, even before he commenced to give away his riches, he had only as much gold as I have made in a single day."

A faint smile crossed the Chinaman's huge flat face.

"Your illustrious relative," he said gravely, "may serve as an example of what I have said to you. He was a man of great strength of will; a giant compared to you. He fortified himself with all the weapons of his own religion; a religion which holds up poverty as a virtue to be much desired. Yet his God was deaf to his prayers. He could not break free from the curse that was laid upon him."

I did not answer. I recalled the night when my uncle had called out to me from the hall door—the night he had sped past me in the darkness, I remembered the ring I had found in the mud close to where I had hidden the yellow box.

I had long suspected that he had never quite overcome his desire for wealth, and now the suspicion was strengthened. Yet I required proof. I was not concerned with the past, but I wished to show Min-Shan that I was able to keep my oath.

"His money?" I muttered. "It was so little I could have made it in one day. Tell me what became of all the gold he must have made if he did not conquer the desire. Tell me that, and I will believe you."

The Chinaman stretched out his great arms, and I noticed that the forefinger of his left hand was missing.

"Do you think that I made this hiding-place, most ignorant one?"

I looked round. I could see nothing but dim baulks of timber in the semi-darkness. I had no idea of its nature or extent, but I knew well enough that no one could have made such a place without plenty of time and leisure to do his work. Then the meaning of his words flashed upon me.

"Do you mean that my uncle made it?" I asked suddenly.

"It was made years before your uncle was born," he replied, "by robbers who hid their stolen goods in this land; by—I do not remember the name by which you call them."

"Smugglers?" I suggested.

"That is the word," he said. "It was made by these men, and your illustrious relative found the place, and made use of it. The ship above our heads belonged to him, and here—but I will show you the place, and you shall see with your own eyes."

He rose to his feet and loomed gigantic in the dim light. Then he gripped me by the arm and pulled me up from the ground.

"Come with me," he said. "I will show you that which will send the blood more quickly through your veins."

He picked up the lamp from the floor and led me across the stone flags to a wall that seemed to be made of small dingy yellow bricks laid one on the top of the other without any mortar or cement.

Then he reached up his hand into the darkness high over my head, and held out one of the bricks.

"Take this," he said.

I stretched out my open palms, and he laid the brick on them. I clutched it with my fingers, but it broke through my clasp and fell with a metallic ring on the pavement. It was so heavy that I could not hold it with my bound hands.

"Gold?" I asked in a low whisper.

"Gold," he replied, "nothing but gold. The bricks stand six feet in thickness against the earthen wall."

He moved round the chamber, and I followed him. As far as I could roughly guess, it was about forty feet square and ten feet high, and, save for two doorways, every inch of the walls was lined a couple of yards thick with solid gold. The heavy baulks of timber that I had seen from my seat on the floor stood away from the wall, and were placed as pillars to shore up the great beams of the roof. The walls were all of gold—an inconceivable amount of gold. I tried vaguely to work it out in cubic feet, but my brain reeled at the figures.

"Here," said Min-Shan gravely, "lies the work of your uncle's life. This is the use to which he put his wealth. He desired none of the things that money can buy. But he could not conquer the desire for gold. Year after year he made it, and buried it beneath the earth. Beyond this room there is yet another, and beyond that yet another again. I did not speak idly when I said that none could escape the curse of Kiao Lung."

I stood in silence, and for one brief moment I realized that I was helpless in the toils of my fate. Then I thrust the thought from my mind, and the lust of gold

seized me with such violence that I trembled in every limb. I would escape and make this vast treasure my own. Min-Shan might depart with his accursed secret. This stupendous hoard of wealth would gratify all my desires.

"Let me go free," I said, after a long pause. "There is gold enough here to satisfy the lust of any man. You cannot take it with you. Leave England and let me have this. It is more than I want."

Min-Shan smiled.

"Were it a thousand times as much," he said, "it would not be enough. You would still want more. You cannot escape the curse of Kiao Lung."

I did not reply, and, in the silence which followed, all my ambitions and desires seemed to be drawn off me, as a veil might be pulled from a woman's face. I realized that I was cold, hungry, and exhausted with fatigue. The fires that had warmed me during the past twenty-four hours seemed suddenly to have died away into gray ashes. My physical needs asserted themselves. My visions of wealth faded. I only knew that I wanted food and rest. For the moment nothing else in the world seemed to matter. I looked piteously into the inscrutable face of Min-Shan. He read my thoughts.

"You are tired," he said quietly. "You are hungry. You shall have food and rest."

A gleam of hope flashed across my mind.

"I thank you," I replied. "You mean well by me, after all? You will let me go?"

"We Easterns do not change our minds," he replied.

"But you will need all your strength, and it is ill work playing on a broken harp."

He left me, and I shuddered. A chill seemed to have crept into my bones. I ascribed it to fear of what awaited me. But I know now that it was partly due to the events of the last few hours, and that my midnight vigil on the damp grass and in the cold fog had left its mark on my exhausted frame.

In a few minutes he returned. A faint yellow light streamed from a half-open door and died away into darkness. Then he came to my side bearing a tray of rough unpolished boards, on which reposed a dozen oysters taken from the creek, part of a wild duck, three small fish, and a jug of water.

He laid the tray on the ground, fastened my feet securely together, and untied the rope round my wrists. Then he bade me eat, and, retiring to a short distance, seated himself on a small rug, and appeared to be lost in meditation.

I devoured every scrap of the cold repast with wolfish eagerness, tearing the flesh off the duck with my teeth, and crunching up the fish, bones and all. When I had finished, the Chinaman advanced, and picking me up in his arms carried me to another part of the room, and laid me down on a bed of dried rushes. I turned over with a sigh of content, and, though I was still shivering with cold, I soon fell asleep from sheer bodily exhaustion. Even the thought of what the future held for me was powerless to keep me awake.

I do not know how long I slept, but when at last I

opened my eyes I was in darkness. I could hear the quiet breathing of some one; that, and the beating of my own heart were the only sounds in the silence.

"Are you awake, Min-Shan?" I said drowsily.

"I have kept watch," he replied. "I trust you are refreshed, O illustrious one."

"I feel better; I am grateful for your kindness."

"Do not thank me," he said quietly. "I have dealt with you as your police deal with a murderer who has tried to cut his own throat. The whole art of medicine is employed to nurse him back to life in order that they may have the pleasure of hanging him."

I shuddered at the sound of his voice. It seemed strange and terrible in the darkness.

"When do you start?" I asked.

"When I have taken my rest," he replied, "and have thought out some pleasant way of dealing with you. There is no need for haste. It will be a slow business, most eminent one, but worthy of your rank and wealth."

"I do not see how my death will benefit you," I said in a voice that showed my willingness to discuss the matter in a calm and impartial spirit. "On the other hand, if you let me go free, I can help you to escape from England to your native land."

"You are kind," he replied; "but I have made my own arrangements. I have fought single-handed so far—and with success."

I did not answer him. I was suddenly seized with a strange desire to know something more of this man, who

had sprung so silently from the sea, and achieved his purpose in the face of almost insuperable difficulties.

"You speak remarkably good English," I said abruptly, as though anxious to turn the conversation from my own affairs.

"My mother was an Englishwoman," he replied, "and for that reason I was chosen to lead this sacred expedition."

"The whole story is a mystery to me," I said quietly. "I should like to hear more of it."

"I will tell you," he replied. "There is no reason why you should not know. 'Your lips are sealed?'"

"My lips are sealed," I said quietly.

"The death of your servant," he began, "and the recovery of the sacred sphere was the crowning point of a task which has extended over many years. It was more than ten years before we traced the yellow box to its hiding place, and then I did not know that it was in your uncle's possession till after I had been cast up on this coast. We always believed it to be in the possession of a man called Playle, who escaped us, but who bears the mark of our handiwork to this very day. His humble birth and position baffled all our enquiries, and it was many years before we traced him. Then there were preparations to be made, extensive and complete, and it was not till a short time ago that we anchored off your coast."

He paused, as though the recollection of that awful night could find no outlet in speech.

"I remember the night well," I said. "I went out to the wreck with Playle."

"I was the only man saved," he replied. "I came ashore on a piece of wreckage beneath the walls of your home. I clambered in at the window. Your uncle saw me and fled with a cry of terror into the night. I asked myself why this stranger should be afraid of me, and I followed him. He could not escape me, turn and double as he would. I kept close to his heels, and he cried out that he had no reason to fear me, and that he had cast the box into the sea. Then I knew the truth, and knew that what I sought was not in the hands of the man Playle."

"Well," I answered eagerly, "what then?"

"I ran my quarry to earth," continued the voice from the darkness. "Here, in this hiding-place, amid the gold that he had heaped up through all the long years."

"And here," I said, gravely, "you killed him?"

"No," the man answered slowly. "I did not kill him. It has been a long business. I fear that I shall not be able to spare so much time in your own case."

"Do you mean to say that my uncle is alive?" I cried out.

"Yes," replied the voice calmly, "your uncle is alive."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE GODDESS OF GOLD

I STARED into the darkness with horror stricken eyes. I could not see Min-Shan's face, but his words left no doubt as to the terrible fate that had overtaken my uncle. I pictured to myself the long weeks of torment, the unending gloom, the silence only broken by the wretched victim's shrieks and moans, the imperturbable calm and implacable purpose of the torturer. Here, within a few miles of the place where I had spent day after day in the pursuit of wealth, the richest man in all the world had been dying by inches, waiting hour after hour for the help that never came.

A horrible fear gripped my heart and my conscience pierced my brain like a sword. I had been too careless of my uncle's fate, I had not prosecuted the search as keenly and vigorously as I might have done. I had forgotten him in my mad desire for riches, I had left him to die. But God had punished me, and had brought me to the same pit of death and torment. I felt that I could look for no help from heaven. Yet I clasped my bound hands and prayed that we might both be delivered from our doom.

Then my fear gave way to helpless rage. I longed to cry out and curse the devil that sat so silently in the darkness. But I restrained myself. I saw that it might yet be possible for me to save both myself and my uncle.

But I should have to meet Min-Shan with his own weapons, with quiet cunning, and silent resolve.

"Well, illustrious thinker," he said after a long pause, "have you nothing to say? Are you not pleased that your noble relative is alive?"

"His life is nothing to me," I replied quietly, "and I would rather have his wealth than his company."

"I fear," he continued, "that you will have his company for a little while."

"Has he been here all the time?" I asked in a disinterested voice.

"Yes, save for a few hours when I took him to find the yellow box and he escaped. I caught him on the very threshold of his home."

I recalled the piece of cloth I had found on a nail outside the library window and shuddered.

"And I suppose you tortured him for your amusement?"

"Not altogether for my amusement," he replied. "I wanted information which he declined to give."

"I should like to see him," I said abruptly. "I suppose you have no objection?"

He laughed. "If you will take my advice," he replied, "you will interview him in the dark. He is not a pretty sight."

"You are considerate," I said with an effort at calmness. "I will talk to him in the dark."

There was a rustling of garments, the sound of heavy feet on the stone floor, and then a great hand gripped me by the arm and pulled me to my feet.

"If you will come with me," he said, "I will introduce you to your noble and revered relative."

He led me across the chamber and, opening a door, pushed me through into another room which was also in darkness. Then he closed the door behind him, and once more gripped me by the arm. The smell in this room was overpowering. As we crossed it, I heard something stir in one corner, and a pair of yellow eyes glowed in the darkness.

"What is that?" I whispered.

"Ka-yu-ka," he replied. "She is hungry, and she does not like strangers."

There was a sharp hiss and something lashed the floor with heavy blows. Min-Shan spoke a few words softly in his native tongue and there was silence.

"I will introduce you to her afterwards," he said. "One or two of your friends have already made her acquaintance."

"Who is she?" I asked, knowing well enough that it was the snake that had killed the thief and Rosick.

"She is one of the Seven Sisters," he replied. "The last of her race. The others are dead." He opened another door, and pushing me through, closed it behind him. We were still in darkness.

We advanced half way across the room and then stopped. A faint moan came out of the silence and then the rattle of chains.

"So soon," muttered a harsh, broken voice. "Have you no pity? Oh, who will deliver me from the body of this death?" Then the voice rose into a shrill scream

of terror. "Kill me, kill me," it shrieked. "Let me die, for pity's sake, let me die!"

"Have no fear," replied Min-Shan, "I have brought a friend to see you. Your beloved nephew has searched and searched, and has found you at last."

"Thank God," moaned that terrible voice, and then, as though realizing the situation, "May God help him."

"Perhaps you would like to be alone," said Min-Shan. "I am sure that after so long a parting you must both have much to say to each other."

"Yes," I cried fiercely. "Leave us alone for a few minutes."

He took me by the arm and leading me to one of the wooden pillars, locked my hands in some manacles that were fixed to the timber.

"You can now talk to your heart's content," he said. "You are about five yards apart. You cannot embrace or come to blows, but you can talk. I will leave you."

He crossed the floor and I heard the door crash to behind him. For a few moments neither of us spoke. I sank to the ground and discovered that the chains were so short that my hands were on a level with my head.

"Uncle," I said timidly, after a long silence.

"Harry, my boy," came the answer, like an echo from the darkness. "What has brought you here?"

For a moment a lie was on my lips. How easy it was to say that I had come to save him. But I could not lie in the presence of death.

"Chance brought me here," I said, "but I will save you if I can. We have long thought you dead. I am a

prisoner like yourself. I think the same fate is in store for me."

"God save you from it," he whispered. "Harry, dare you strike a light?"

"I have no matches," I replied, "and if I had, I could not get at them." But, as I spoke, I knew that if a lighted candle had been thrust into my hand I should have closed my eyes and dashed out the light.

"Tell me what has happened since I—since I died," he continued. "I would like to know what has happened in the sunlight and the air."

I told him as briefly as possible, but I said nothing of Mary Playle. When I had finished, he began to pray aloud in a horrible croaking voice. At first the words dropped slowly from his lips, but, as he proceeded, they quickened into a torrent of harsh, broken eloquence, fervid, incoherent, and only half intelligible. He prayed for the two of us, that we might both be delivered from the snare of riches and the power of the evil one, and that God might have mercy upon our souls.

I listened to him in a bitter spirit of unbelief. I remembered the night I had come home from Oxford, and that other night when I had taken away the yellow box to cast it into the sea. I recalled the fervor of his prayers, and how strenuously he had asked for strength to fight his battle. I saw the horror and the mockery of it all. His prayers had remained unanswered, and, for all the good they had done him, they might as well have been left unsaid.

At last his wild flood of words died away in an unin-

telligible murmur, in which I could only distinguish "Deliver me for Thy Son's sake." Then there was silence.

"Have courage, uncle," I said firmly. "I am young and strong, and I will not leave you. I will find some way of escape for us both."

"Aye, you are young and strong," he replied, "but what will you be a week from now? Perhaps as old and weak as I am. Trust not in your youth and strength, Harry. Put all your trust in God."

I laughed bitterly. I said not a word, but the laugh alone was blasphemy.

"Unhappy boy!" croaked my uncle. "Think you that you can fight unaided against the powers of darkness. The fight is not against earthly strength and cunning, but against all the devilry of the Kiao Lung."

"Yet it is earthly strength and cunning that keep us here," I rejoined, "and we have to fight a creature of flesh and blood."

"You speak in ignorance," he said solemnly. "If you escape from here, you escape not from the power that grips your soul. The madness of the Kiao Lung is upon you; the eternal lust of gold. If you escape, you will return like the moth to the candle. You will never rest till the sacred sphere is in your possession. And they will never rest till they have taken it from you again."

"If I once get hold of it," I said sternly, "I promise you that they will have to come with an army to take it from me again."

"Aye," he replied, "that is the curse—that you will

not let it go. It is from this desire that God alone can deliver you. What are earthly torments compared to the everlasting torment of the soul? Pray for help, I implore you, pray that you may be delivered."

"Yet the immediate danger is that of earthly torment! Let me free you and myself from this cursed dungeon before we are both too weak to fight. Then it will be time to think of the welfare of our souls."

"There is a way of escape," he said in a whisper that scarcely reached my ears. "You know that I found this place years ago, and that here——"

"Yes, I know; I know," I interrupted hastily. "He told me. I've seen the gold. But the way of escape; quick, before he returns. Speak quietly."

"In the next room," he continued, "on the right hand side of the room as you enter the door, the fourth row of bricks from the bottom, between the fifteenth and sixteenth brick from the corner nearest the door. Can you remember all that?"

"Yes, yes," I said eagerly.

My heart beat quick with excitement. If there were only a small loop-hole of escape, I would force myself through it.

"Repeat what I said," he replied. "I wish to be certain that you have it right."

I repeated it word for word.

"Well," he continued, "between those two bricks you will find a small tube. It is the end of a fuse leading to a large store of gunpowder. I placed it there in case I might wish to destroy all traces of this hiding-place. I

had only to connect this with another fuse leading into the open air ——”

“But the way of escape?” I cried. A horrible suspicion of the truth began to dawn upon me. “The way of escape?”

“A painless death,” he replied. “For weeks I have prayed for such a death. Perhaps before long you, too, will be glad to know what I have told you.”

I was silent. My sudden hope had been dashed to pieces, and I was numb with the shock and crash of it about my ears. Before I could frame a reply, the door opened, and Min-Shan entered.

“O worthy relatives,” he said softly, “I must part you, but you shall meet again.”

He bound my wrists with rope, unfastened the pin of the shackle that held me to the chains, and led me through the doorway. I turned round and looked back into the darkness.

“Good-bye, uncle,” I said cheerfully.

There was no answer, but I heard a low muttering, and caught the disjointed words of a prayer. Then Min-Shan closed the door.

“Now,” said the Chinaman, “I will introduce you to Ka-yu-ka. I should like you to see everything of interest in the place while you have leisure to look round you. To-morrow we may both be busy.”

He lit a lamp, and holding it in his hand, advanced towards a large heap of rushes in the corner of the room. As he neared it, the rushes quivered, and a great yellow head rose up on its slender, graceful neck. He spoke a

few words in his own language, and the enormous snake uncoiled itself and moved towards me.

I watched it as one might watch a specimen behind the bars of a cage. I should have been frightened, if I had not known that Min-Shan held no such merciful death in store for me. As it was, I was merely fascinated. The long, sinuous body with its glittering yellow scales was wondrously beautiful, and the topaz eyes held me almost spellbound. For some reason or other I recalled the words of the Bible: "It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." And I saw before me not a mere reptile, but the eternal enemy of man; "cursed above every beast of the field."

Suddenly the great reptile stopped, and coiling itself on the floor at my feet, lay motionless save for the quivering of its neck and head.

"She will not hurt you," said Min-Shan. "She is gentle and harmless."

"Very," I replied grimly. "I have seen some of her gentle ways. The man above there, on the grass—he has experienced her soft embrace."

"She was angry," he said with a smile. "She will only kill men when she is angry. She is truly feminine. If they are kind to her, she adores them, but, if they hurt her, she kills them, but no more; she will not eat them."

"And women?" I asked with a smile. "I suppose she is jealous?"

"The sight of a woman rouses her to fury," he replied, "and by the laws of our religion she is entitled to one every year."

"And you give her one?" I asked in horror; "a human sacrifice?"

"We can give her no less," he answered. "It is the decree of Kiao Lung. The Seven Sisters are each entitled to one life in every year. It is curious that although she will not touch a man, she will enjoy a woman as a most dainty morsel."

"Very curious," I replied with a shudder. I had a vision of a picture I had once seen of a boa constrictor eating a deer—of the limp, crushed form of the animal—of the huge distended body of the snake.

"I should say," I replied, "that the women of your race must be thankful that her six sisters are dead."

"Perhaps you will not believe it," he said, "but the women of my race esteem it an honor to die in the arms of Ka-yu-ka. The names of the victims are revered as sacred, and in the life hereafter they sit by the throne of the great Kiao Lung himself."

"Very gratifying," I replied drily. "I have seen enough of your beautiful goddess. Please consider the interview at an end."

The sight of the reptile sickened me. I could think of nothing but the horror of those human sacrifices.

He spoke gently and almost lovingly to the snake, and it crawled back to its bed of rushes. Then he led me into the outer room, and chained me securely to one of the great wooden pillars.

"I must leave you for a while," he said. "I have laid a trap and wish to see if the bird has flown into it. Perhaps in a few hours' time I shall be able to give you an

opportunity of seeing with your own eyes what I have just described to you. To-day is Ka-yu-ka's feast day, and I go out to find her a worthy offering."

I stared at him in silent horror. I opened my lips to speak, but no words came to my tongue. Was it possible that such foul devilry could take place in the nineteenth century in a Christian land; in the very centre of civilization?

It seemed absurd; a mere nightmare; and yet, if once the woman fell into his hands, who was to prevent him from carrying out his diabolical purpose?

"I fear," he continued, "that no woman of this land will appreciate the honor that I propose to bestow upon her. Yet Ka-yu-ka will not know the difference, for they all fear her when the moment comes."

"You devil!" I cried hoarsely. "This shall not take place if I can prevent it."

He smiled.

"God will prevent it," I yelled. "He will strike you dead; you and your cursed reptile together."

"Kiao Lung will approve," he said reverently.

"Fool," I shrieked. "Who spoke of Kiao Lung? I spoke of the God, to Whom Kiao Lung is but an obscene insect beneath His heel. He will strike and crush you to powder."

"He is not here," Min-Shan replied quietly. "Your uncle has called to Him, but He did not answer. There is no God but Kiao Lung."

He extinguished the light, and a few moments later a broad slab of daylight streamed into the chamber. Then there was a crash, a click, and then—darkness.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE FEAST OF KA-YU-KA

I WAS left alone with my thoughts. A few yards away from me, yet separated by a silence like that of the grave, lay my uncle, so horribly mutilated that even Min-Shan had spared me the sight of him. Before long I, too, should suffer the same fate. Yet both these horrors were obliterated by the thought of what I might see and hear in the next few hours when Ka-yu-ka received her yearly offering of a woman's life.

I found but little comfort in the hope that God would save an innocent woman from this awful death. The words that I had hurled so boldly at the Chinaman now seemed no more than hollow echoes in the darkness.

"There is no God but Kiao Lung," he had replied. Was there not some reason for his belief? Could not I myself testify to the fact that I had felt the power of this heathen deity, and that I could not escape from the spell that had been laid upon me? Had prayers and supplications availed my uncle?

Yet it was possible that God would not permit an innocent woman to suffer. Both I and my uncle had sinned, and were left to endure the consequences of our sin. We had bowed the knee to Baal, and God had allowed Baal to scourge us. But this woman—whoever she might be—could scarcely have sinned so deeply as to deserve her fate.

But then, again, I remembered how many innocent people had suffered since the beginning of the world. Only a few weeks previously I had read an account of the death of some missionaries in China ; pious and devoted men and women, who had died such hideous and shameful deaths that one of the women with her dying breath prayed that no account of her sufferings might ever be published to the world. Were not these innocent ?

And so, hour after hour, I pondered in the darkness, struggling with the problems of life and death, of pain and free will, and innocent suffering, like a swimmer in a stormy sea. All seemed chaos ; I could reduce nothing to reason or just order or law. I did not then realize that I lacked the faith which would have triumphed where mere reason met with defeat. Only one clear thing rose out of the tumult of my thoughts. I must save this woman from death.

I turned my attention from the abstract to the concrete. I had three lives to save, and it was no time for religious speculation. I was unarmed, helpless, and securely chained—of a truth a broken reed for any one to depend on. Yet, if I could find my revolver, I might still make a fight of it.

But, as far as I could discover, all trace of the weapon had vanished. All the time the lamp was alight I had kept my eyes open for some sign of the little steel instrument which might turn the scale in my favor. But it had vanished, and it was ridiculous to suppose that Min-Shan would leave it where I could possibly get at it.

Still, I resolved to make a fight for liberty. I was helpless with my hands in the iron manacles, but I might manage to cut the rope. The Chinaman was of enormous strength, but still if I could lay my hands on some sort of a weapon—— I made up my mind to be calm, and think out a plan seriously, leaving nothing to chance.

Then, after several hours of silence and darkness, and the horror of my own black thoughts, I heard a faint noise overhead. A few moments afterwards a mass of wood fell with a crash on to the floor, and a square patch of light appeared.

Then I saw something dark obscure the patch of light, and descend slowly to the ground, which it touched with a gentle thud. After that the moving figure of a man blocked up the entrance, and I saw him let himself softly down to the floor.

Then there was the scraping sound of wood, a few heavy blows, and then darkness.

"Is that you, Min-Shan?" I asked in a trembling voice.

"It is even I, oh, far-seeing one," he replied. "Few others come in by this entrance, and none leave it but I."

I heard him drag something along the floor, and then I heard a groan.

"What is that, Min-Shan?" I asked, though I knew well enough what it was.

"The offering for Ka-yu-ka," he replied. "She walked into the trap. I can promise you an interesting spectacle to-night—we must wait till after midnight, till the dawn of the Feast Day. Oh, she is a fair woman; a fitting gift

in return for all that Ka-yu-ka has given. There are not such fair women in our land."

"I should like to see her face," I said.

I was stiff and cold with terror, and I needed something to send the blood leaping through my veins; something that would stir the lust of vengeance, and nerve my arm and brain for a terrible conflict. I knew that the woman's face would do this much for me.

He struck a match and lit the lamp. I saw the form of a human being lying within a few feet of me. But the whole face and body were swathed with a long white piece of linen, so that the figure lay stiff and motionless as a log. I could see, however, that the tight outline of the linen moved with her breath, and I could hear the faint groans that came from her gagged mouth.

He drew the bundle close to me, and fumbled with the bandages by the head. Then he unwound part of the linen strip and showed me the face of Mary Playle.

For one moment I saw every feature—clear, white, and distinct. Then they swam round and round in a yellow mist. Then my chains seemed to clank horribly, and the noise of them almost deafened me. I fell forward, and the whole scene disappeared into darkness.

* * * * *

When I came to my senses, I found that I had been moved into the next room, and that my hands had merely been bound together with a cord.

My head and shoulders were dripping with water, and it was clear that Min-Shan had taken the trouble to revive



I saw Mary Playle crouching in a corner.

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me. He stood by my side with a lantern in his hand, and a contented smile on his huge placid face.

"Awake, sleeper," he cried, "awake, for the Feast of Ka-yu-ka has begun."

I looked past his bulky frame and saw Mary Playle crouching in a corner. The long strip of linen had been unwound from her body, and lay close to her like a winding-sheet. The gag had been taken from her mouth, and her limbs did not appear to be fettered in any way. But I could see that she was paralyzed with fear.

She did not even glance at me, though the light fell full upon my face.

Her eyes were fixed on the corner where the great snake stirred uneasily, and every time the yellow head and neck darted up from the rushes her whole body quivered, as though it had been touched by the long slender tongue.

"Ka-yu-ka is restless," continued the Chinaman. "The offering is a suitable one—the niece of the man who tried to rob us; the sweetheart of the man who succeeded in robbing us. Could I have found a more appropriate gift?"

The hot blood surged through my veins, and every muscle of my body became rigid. I longed to spring at him and dash my bound hands in his face. I longed to spit out venomous words that would pierce his Oriental calm. But I had the strength to restrain myself. I was silent and motionless, for I knew that in this way alone could I achieve my purpose.

"Perchance you would speak with her," he continued,

watching the play of my features as a cat might watch a mouse. "Ka-yu-ka will not be jealous, if you whisper words of love in her ear."

"I would speak with her," I replied in a cold hard voice. I knew that he only wished to heighten the agony of the situation by granting a farewell interview. But I meant to make good use of my opportunity. He nodded his head and pointed to the crouching figure by the wall.

I rose unsteadily to my feet and crossed the room. I noticed that Mary Playle was within a few inches of the fuse my uncle had placed in the chamber. Well, if the worst came to the worst, I could involve the four of us in one stupendous disaster—one common grave.

Min-Shan watched me with a smile. It was clear that he saw no danger in letting me converse with his other victim. Probably he did not trouble himself about my bonds, and did not mind if the girl unfastened the rope at my wrists. Physically he was more than a match for the two of us. We were unarmed, and the doors were certain to be locked.

When I reached the side of the terror-stricken girl, the Chinaman contemptuously turned his back on us, and walking over to a small square rug, which had been placed a few feet from the snake, he fell on his knees and began to drone out a long incantation or prayer in his native language.

"Mary," I whispered softly. She did not answer or even turn her head. Her eyes were still fixed on the snake. I grasped her by the arm with my fettered hands.

"Mary," I repeated, "I am here to save you. I, Harry Drew. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you," she answered, as though in a dream.

"You must be calm," I continued; "you must pull yourself together. My wrists are bound with a piece of rope. You must untie it now—at once. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she replied, still in the same far off voice, but she did not turn her head or move her hands. I was seized with a sudden fear that she was in a trance.

"Untie it at once," I said slowly, and I thrust my bound wrists into her icy fingers. She did not look at me or speak, but she commenced to fumble with the knots. I continued to talk to her, lest our silence should arouse Min-Shan's suspicions. In less than two minutes my hands were free. But still Mary Playle stared at the snake and quivered every time it raised its head. I counted the bricks along the wall and found what I sought.

"Close to us," I whispered, "is a fuse. If the worst comes to the worst, I will light it, and we shall all be blown to atoms. But I will try everything else before I come to this last resource. Good-bye, dearest." I threw my arms round her and kissed her passionately. Her lips were cold as ice, but the sudden embrace must have thawed her to life. She suddenly gave a cry of terror and burst into tears.

Min-Shan rose to his feet and saw my arms about her neck. He smiled. As I had thought, he did not care

whether I were bound or free. He moved a step towards us.

"Stay, O worthy Min-Shan," I cried in a mocking voice, "for if you come a step nearer to us, I will send you and Ka-yu-ka to eternal damnation!"

He paused with a puzzled look on his face.

I calmly took out my match-box and lit a match. Then I saw in his face that he understood. He had himself discovered the fuse, but had till that moment forgotten its existence.

"If you move a step nearer to me," I repeated, "I shall light this fuse, and there will be some pretty fireworks for your feast day."

He eyed me with grave composure, carefully scrutinizing my face. I think he saw that I had uttered no idle threat.

"But surely, most illustrious," he said with quiet dignity, "you are not weary of life?"

"You have condemned the three of us to death," I replied, "and we would rather die in this manner than in the more artistic ways you have designed for us. So you see that it doesn't matter to us. You have only yourself to consider."

"You know enough of the East," he replied quietly, "to realize that we Orientals hold our lives cheap in comparison to duty. But what do you require of me?"

"In the first place, the release of this lady and my uncle."

"And yourself?" he asked politely.

"I will look after myself," I replied. I realized that

there might be some difficulty about my own escape, for directly I left the fuse, my power over Min-Shan would be gone. For a few moments there was silence, broken only by the angry hissing of Ka-yu-ka. I racked my brain for some solution of the problem. Two alternatives suggested themselves to me. Min-Shan must be locked in the inner room, or else he must be bound hand and foot. Either of these operations would have to be done by Mary Playle or my uncle. I dared not leave the fuse.

"Mary," I said softly, "can you be brave and calm for a minute?"

She did not answer me. Her face was white as a sheet and her eyes were fixed on the snake. She appeared to be in a trance.

"Mary," I said sternly. She did not look at me or move a muscle of her face or body. I saw that she would be no help to me in my plans.

"Min-Shan," I said in a firm voice, "go into the inner room and release my uncle and bring him in here." He hesitated, and looked as though he were about to spring at me. I lit a match and held it within a foot of the fuse. I noticed that there was only one other match left in the box.

"Very well," he replied. "I will obey," and he disappeared through the doorway. I took the opportunity to seize Mary Playle and shake her roughly.

"Mary," I said hoarsely, "for God's sake, rouse yourself. I need your help." But she was stiff and unresponsive as a corpse. The great snake hissed and lashed itself into fury in the corner.

Then I heard the crash of chains on a stone floor, and a few moments afterwards the Chinaman reappeared with a bundle in his arms.

"Your revered relative is dead," he said quietly. "I took the liberty of covering him with this cloth. Neither you nor the lady would care to look at him."

"Dead!" I said mechanically. Then I laughed hysterically. Let the dead bury their dead. The living required all my thought and skill. :

"Now take this lady," I said sternly, "and carry her into the open air—at least a hundred yards from the hulk overhead."

"Before we proceed farther," he replied, "I may as well be plain with you. I am willing to exchange a life for a life. If you agree not to light that fuse, I will let either you or this lady free."

"Both!" I said imperatively. "Both! Those are my terms."

"I have told you mine," he replied. "It remains for you to accept or refuse them. I refuse yours."

"And I refuse yours," I retorted sharply.

"Think over it," he said with a smile. "There is, I believe, a proverb in your language which says that half a loaf is better than no bread."

"It cuts both ways," I replied.

"On the contrary," he said, "it only cuts one way. My life is nothing to me. I have accomplished the mission for which I came to England."

I was silent. I realized the truth and force of his words. Life was nothing to the calm impassive Oriental.

Death under such circumstances might even seem a glorious end to his career. He was playing no game of bluff, and I instinctively felt that, if I refused his terms, I should have to bury all three of us in a common grave.

So then it had come to this, Mary Playle's life or mine. What did life hold for each of us? For her a quiet uneventful existence in a small fishing village, perhaps in time a marriage with some worthy young fisherman. For me all the glories and splendors of illimitable wealth, a kingdom, a place in the world's history. I asked myself whether I did not owe it to the world that she should die, and I should live. Even the existence of a nation depended on my life.

And there in the gloom of that underground chamber, and face to face with one of the strangest scenes that could have been placed before a man, I saw, as in a dream, the marble palace of Viera glittering like a crown of snow, the mountain barrier bristling with guns and armed men, and Styria herself holding the balance of power in Europe.

Then suddenly there was an angry hiss, and Ka-yu-ka commenced to crawl from her corner. Mary Playle gave a shriek of terror and flung her arms round my neck. The spell had been broken. She sobbed and trembled in my arms. My mind came back from Styria to the reality of things. I saw that only the madness of Kiao Lung could have ever suggested the possibility of my purchasing my own life at the cost of hers. The roughest sailor in a shipwreck will give his life for some woman, of whose very name he is ignorant, and think

nothing of the sacrifice. And yet I, in the case of the woman I professed to love, had argued and reasoned, and had —— Bah, it was inconceivably hideous.

"Ah, would you?" I cried, suddenly loosing Mary Playle and striking my last match. Min-Shan had taken advantage of my temporary distraction, and had sprung forward. He stopped as he saw the flame and smiled.

"Well," he said quietly, "have you decided?"

"Go back a couple of yards and call the snake back, and I will tell you," I replied. He returned to his original position, and Ka-yu-ka followed him.

"I have decided," I continued. "If you will release this lady, we will cry quits. I will leave myself in your hands."

"It must be a question of honor between us," he said thoughtfully. "You must move away from the fuse, and I must take the lady out of this place. It is impossible for both acts to be simultaneous. One must trust to ——" He stopped. There was a crash in the outer room, as though something had fallen to the floor, then the sound of footsteps, and then a thundering blow on the locked door.

"Help!" I cried. "Help!" Min-Shan sprang at me, and clutching my throat, dashed me on the ground. He knew well enough that I should not fire the fuse with help so near at hand. Ka-yu-ka, enraged by the noise of the scuffle, lashed herself into fury and moved from her bed of rushes. Min-Shan lifted me up as though I had been a baby and carried me to the far side of the room. And the thundering continued at the door.

"Open," yelled a voice on the other side of the wall. "Open, you hell-hound, or by God, I will open it for myself."

A terrific shower of blows poured on the woodwork, and I saw the glint of steel cutting through the oaken planks. Ka-yu-ka was close to Mary Playle and had already encircled her body with one glittering coil. I lay half stunned on the stone floor. Amid all the noise and confusion, Min-Shan alone was calm. His huge face was absolutely impassive. In his great hand he held a long bar of iron an inch in thickness.

Then there was a terrible scream from the lips of Mary Playle, and a second later the shattered doorway bulged inwards and splintered to fragments. In the gap stood Billy Playle, his bare arms red with blood, his face convulsed with fury, and a long axe trembling in his great hairy hands.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE AVENGER

FOR one second he paused and took in the scene before him. Then with a single back-handed blow from the axe he shore clean through Ka-yu-ka's slender neck, and the hideous head went spinning to the ground. The long yellow body writhed for a few moments and then lay motionless with the blood spurting from it in tiny crimson streams.

Playle stepped forward, placed one arm round his niece, and lifted her clear of the reptile's coils. She had fainted and hung limply in his clasp. He gave one look at Min-Shan's face and then placed her on the floor. He saw, as I too saw, that there was work to be done before he could attend to a helpless woman. I crawled back into the darkest corner, weak as a child, yet biding my time, when perhaps I might turn the scale in the conflict between two desperate men.

They faced each other, these two giants, and for a few moments neither of them moved. Min-Shan's face was calm and impassive as that of a statue. Playle's hideous scarred features worked convulsively, his lips were drawn back, displaying his jagged yellow teeth, and there was foam at the corners of his mouth. There was more in his fury than the mere desire to avenge his niece. From my dark corner I read the long hatred of years culmi-

nating in a terrible lust for vengeance, and I saw in his eyes the memory of the hell from which he had emerged as a mere deformed lump of humanity.

Here, I thought to myself, as I watched their motionless bodies, is the conflict of the East with the West. Here stands the calm, the cruel, and the impassive Oriental, and, face to face with him, the quick nervous energy of the European. Both men of gigantic strength, and both merciless as death. Yet I did not doubt that the advantage lay with Playle. He was the smaller man of the two, and perhaps the less active, but he was well armed, and Min-Shan's bar of iron was a mere toy compared to the great axe which had already hewn a way through a solid door of oak.

Playle was the first to break the silence.

"I've been waiting for you, I have," he growled. "I've a few old scores to settle with your cursed race. And I'll wipe them out to-night, if wood and steel will hold together. I'll send you to hell, curse you, to join your mates. I sent some of them to hell one night, I did. The Lord be praised!"

Min-Shan eyed him quietly, as a lion tamer might look at a dangerous beast. His calm face lashed Playle to another burst of fury. A torrent of foul oaths broke from the sailor's lips. He shuffled inch by inch across the floor, spitting out curses at his opponent. Then he suddenly launched himself at the Chinaman like a thunderbolt.

I saw the great axe flash back in the lamplight and descend with such incredible force and swiftness that

Min-Shan had no time to avoid the blow, and scarcely had time to parry it with his own weapon. The steel axe head shore clean through the bar of soft iron and lopped it in two, as I might have lopped a broomstick. And such was the stupendous strength of the blow that the shaft of the axe itself was splintered, the head flew singing to the wall, and Playle was left with a mere ragged stump of wood in his hands.

The next moment the men were at each other's throats, armed only with such weapons as nature had given them. It was a battle of tooth and claw, a combat of wild beasts, striving, tearing, and panting in their fury. I saw the Chinaman's huge smooth face streaming with blood. I saw him lift Playle from the ground and try to shake him off. I heard the crack of bones as the sailor's great gnarled and knotted arms gripped the man's body like bands of steel. I saw them stagger, fall, and lie writhing on the ground, now one on the top and now the other. Then there was a crash, and the whole scene disappeared in darkness. They had knocked over the lamp, which, being a patent one, had promptly extinguished itself.

I could now see nothing of the combat, but my ears told me that it was being fought with grim fury in the darkness. I heard the sobbing gasps of strong men strained to their uttermost, the scrape and thud of bodies on the stone floor, an occasional snarl or a stifled groan, the sound of something being dragged along the stone, low cries of bestial rage. I shrank close to the wall, lest they might touch me and drag me into that grinding whirlpool of muscle and flesh and bone. I could not tell

which held the upper hand, but I prayed silently that Playle might choke the life out of his adversary.

Then suddenly there was a fiendish yell, the sound of rending garments, the clatter of footsteps, the bang of a door, a distant scuffle, and then silence. One of the combatants had fled.

Then I heard the scraping of a match on its box, and a faint flare of light illuminated the room. Billy Playle had been left in possession of the field, and we were saved.

I watched him crawl feebly along the floor, pick up the lamp and light it. His hands and face were red with blood, his clothing was torn into ribbons, and he panted for breath like a wounded animal. Then he struggled painfully to his feet and limped over to the side of his niece.

"Mary, my gal," he cried hoarsely; "you're safe. The hound has escaped me, but you're safe. Open your eyes, my gal."

She did not answer. He turned to me with a sudden burst of fury.

"Get up, you cur," he cried. "You did well to keep out of the fight. It's your part to slink into a corner, while there is man's work to be done. But, mark you, if I find that you had any hand in this night's devilry, I'll kill you. Do you understand, you reptile? kill you; choke you to death with my own fingers. Aye, that I will, and be glad to do it."

I did not answer him. I was too exhausted to enter into explanations. I felt it unnecessary to tell him that

I had offered my life to save Mary Playle from a terrible death, and that but for his interference the sacrifice would have been made.

Indeed, I thought but little of my part in the matter. No man under the circumstances could have offered to do less. But, as I listened to his biting words, something stirred in my heart, something that had been quiet during all these hours of fear. It was no dull feeling of resentment at a great injustice, but a burning desire to kill the man who spoke to me. If there had been a revolver ready to my hand, I should have taken his life on the spot, though he had but just saved me from death. The curse of Kiao Lung was still upon my soul. The brief interlude of sanity was past.

I did not answer him, but my eyes were fixed on his face in a hungry glare.

He shrank almost imperceptibly from my gaze, and shifted his feet uneasily.

"Don't stare at me, you hound," he growled. "Get up and make yourself useful. Is there any water in this cursed place?"

I did not reply. His eyes blazed with fury, and, shuffling to my side, he kicked me with his heavy boot. I howled with pain and snapped at his leg with my teeth like a dog.

"Get up," he said, "and find some water."

"There is no water," I replied, "and, if you touch me again, I will kill you."

He muttered an oath, and stumbled across the room. Then his eyes caught sight of the white bundle that lay

against the wall. He crawled over to it, lantern in hand, and lifted up the sheet. I closed my eyes.

"Sir Gilbert Drew," I heard him exclaim. "He has only been dead a few hours. What do you know of this?"

"Nothing," I replied, still with closed eyes, "save that a similar death was reserved for me."

Playle gave a horrible laugh. "Aye," he replied grimly, "I recognize their handiwork. Death was a merciful release. And you?" he added more gently, "well, you have good cause to thank me, you have. You can open your eyes. I have covered it up again."

I looked at him, and watched him cross over to Mary Playle and lift her in his arms.

"I must take her home," he said, roughly, "and you'd best follow me, you had."

I tried to rise to my feet, but sank down again with a moan. The pain in my leg was excruciating.

"I can't walk," I said.

"Then you must stay behind," he replied, "for it's sure that I can't carry the two of you. I've been through the mill myself, and it'll take me all my time to get home."

"Don't leave me," I moaned. "He may return."

"I don't think he will return," answered Playle, "and there's not much fight left in him. But look here; I will take my gal outside, then I will fetch you up close to the entrance, and you can close it from the inside with an effort. You'll be safe enough then, and directly I get back to Standinghoe, I'll send some men along."

He spoke kindly, but every word jarred on my overwrought feelings, and the mere sight of him drove me to a state of mind that bordered on frenzy.

"Very well," I said in a harsh, trembling voice, "very well. I will stay here."

He disappeared with the girl in his arms. Then he returned, picked me up as though I had been a child, and carried me to the far end of the outer room. I saw that a ladder ran up the side of a small shaft some ten feet high. Playle held up the lantern and explained to me the cunning arrangement of the trap-door, which opened downwards.

Then he ascended the ladder, and, stretching out his hand, helped me to a position where I could reach the door and the bolt. Then he drew up the door after him, and I bolted it from the inside. The effort caused me the most terrible agony, and, as I clung to the rungs of the ladder, I shrieked with pain.

When at last I reached the floor, I was so exhausted that I lay as motionless as a log. I felt as though I had been cast down into a tomb. I was alone with the dead.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE COMPACT

FOR a whole hour I did not move. Then I found strength to crawl round the golden walls of the room and reach the bed of rushes where Min-Shan had first laid me. A deal box, dirty and mildewed, lay in the shadow of a wooden pillar. I opened it and found several pieces of mouldy bread and a half-empty bottle of brandy. I took a long draught of the raw spirit, and fresh life came into my heart and brain. I found three cigarettes in my pocket, and smoked them one after the other till the air was thick with wreaths of blue vapor.

The nicotine soothed my nerves, and by degrees the fear and agony of the past few hours slipped from my mind. I began to look round the room with satisfaction, and taking out a pencil and a piece of paper, tried to calculate the value of its contents. The figures bit deeply into my mind, and I already pictured myself as the heir to fabulous wealth. The lust of gold was once more upon me. I had forgotten the grim lesson that had so recently been drilled into my brain. I only saw the dull yellow bricks that glowed cheerfully in the lamplight and disappeared into darkness. I laughed as I looked at them. Of a truth it was a pleasant prison house.

Then my thoughts turned to the sacred sphere, the

fount and source of eternal and illimitable wealth. Had Min-Shan taken it with him in his flight, or was it still hidden within a few yards of me? It had suddenly become all the world to me. All the stirring events of the last few hours had faded into obscurity. My whole horizon was filled with a glorious hope that I might yet regain possession of the treasure I had lost.

I seized the lantern in my trembling hand and commenced to crawl painfully round the room, searching every inch of floor and wall for some hiding-place which might conceal the small metal globe. I found nothing. I tapped every inch of the stone flags, I removed every brick that seemed to lie loosely in the wall, but I found nothing.

Then I paused at the door of the next room, and listened as though I expected to hear something. Of course, there was silence, for the dead do not move or speak. Some power impelled me to continue my search, though Fear stood at the threshold and guarded it with a flaming sword.

I hesitated and listened to the beating of my own heart. Then my desire overcame my fear of the dead and I dragged myself through the doorway.

My uncle still lay under the merciful covering of his white sheet, and the wet blood of Ka-yu-ka still glistened on the stone. Nothing stirred in the silence. The room bore the traces of the Titanic conflict. The axe-head, the splinters of the shaft, and the two pieces of the iron bar lay on the floor. The stone itself was scratched and chipped and smeared with blood.

I crawled all round the room, and searched every inch of it thoroughly. I did not even respect the dead, and passed my hand over my uncle's clothes. The lust of gold was in my heart, and nothing else mattered. My search, however, was fruitless, and I made my way into the inner room of all.

Here I saw the chains which had held my uncle through so many weeks of unspeakable agony. They were firmly bolted into one of the great oak pillars that supported the roof, and had doubtless been there since the day of the smugglers. The bottom links were worn smooth and bright. The stone floor was streaked and splashed with dull red stains. To me this room was full of unutterable horror.

Even the next chamber, with its unburied dead, was a sweeter place to linger in than this. The very stones cried out their ghastly story.

In this place, and on this very spot, had been played the last act of the tragedy of my uncle's life. Here the curse of Kiao Lung had brought its hapless victim to the last extremity of human suffering. The awful warning lay in all its hideous nakedness before me. Yet I closed my eyes and turned a deaf ear to the shrieks that seemed to still echo from wall to wall. I was sick with terror, but sustained by the power of my madness. And here, in the very place where my uncle had perished in the midst of the wealth he had accumulated, I, his heir, was hunting for the secret of still vaster riches, groveling for it as a dog for a bone, peering, scratching, and snarling over every inch of floor and wall.

At last I found what I sought. Behind two of the gold bricks, and within reach of the man who had been chained to the pillar, lay the little sphere, for which so many men had died. I seized it with trembling fingers, and caressed it lovingly. All else was forgotten. The chains and smeared stones of the chamber of death faded from sight. I only saw the golden walls and the golden light of the lamp.

I placed the precious object in my pocket, and crawled back into the outer chamber. I passed through the middle room without turning my eyes to look at the dead, and, reaching my couch of rushes, I placed the bottle of brandy to my lips and gulped down the raw spirit till my whole body seemed on fire. Then I sank down into a delicious state of drowsiness, and let my imagination run riot in visions of glittering splendor.

I was roused from my reverie by the gradual fading of the light, and I saw that the lamp was going out. I searched everywhere for oil, but could not find any, and in a few minutes the flame gave a last flicker and I was in darkness.

And with the fading of the light my golden visions died away in a gray mist of fear, and out of the mist crept the figures of both living and dead. The faces of Simson, Loring, Rosick, and my uncle leered at me, and their mouths gibbered unintelligible words. Playle and Min-Shan rose up like gigantic shadows and gripped me by the shoulders. Ka-yu-ka, headless and bleeding, writhed unceasingly, and her coils seemed to be choking the breath out of my body.

I shrieked aloud with terror. I did not fear the dead, but the living. I shrank into the corner close against the wall of gold and listened. The silence was almost unbearable. I cried aloud again and again. The darkness seemed to press on my eyeballs like a sheet of lead. I rose to my knees and clawed at some invisible foe.

And with the fear came back once more that terrible desire to kill; the desire of the beast driven into a corner. The black air was suddenly streaked and splashed with blood red light. Min-Shan and Playle loomed up like phantoms, and, stretching out my hands, I gripped their throats in my puny fingers. I fancied that I could see their faces as they died, and their souls streaming up into the darkness like tongues of flame. Then my strength left me, and I dropped back on the rushes and moaned with terror.

And then at last there came a sound out of the silence, a faint scratching sound, such as the claws of a small animal might make on the stone floor. I strained every nerve to listen. So far as I knew I was the only living thing in this golden tomb.

Yet something moved, and it seemed to me that the noise came from the inner room.

I held my breath and clutched the straw with trembling hands. The sound grew louder, and I fancied I could hear the soft pad of feet, and then the harsh scrape of something being dragged along the floor. A terrible fear seized me, and my heart almost ceased to beat. Was it possible that something had come to life in that other room? In the darkness I pictured to myself a white

shapeless bundle moving inch by inch towards me across the stone.

Then the noise ceased, and all was silence. Cold beads of perspiration stood on my forehead, and my limbs felt numb and frozen.

The strange idea seized me that Kiao Lung himself was moving in the darkness, and that the mysterious god of gold had come to claim his victims. I reached out my hand for the brandy bottle and drained it to the last drop.

For a few minutes there was complete silence. Then the noise began again, and this time it was within a few feet of me. I shrieked aloud with terror, and crawled along the wall till I reached the foot of the ladder.

Then, dizzy and half fainting, I clutched at the rungs and drew myself up from the floor. The pain was terrible, but I thought of nothing save that I must escape from the place where the unknown thing moved in the darkness.

With a stupendous and almost superhuman effort I clung to the top of the ladder, and fumbled with the bolt of the hatchway. It came away in my hand, and the falling mass of wood almost knocked me from my perch. I realized how futile had been my precautions. Playle had, of course, smashed the mechanism of the concern to pieces when he forced an entrance into the vaults. It was a marvel that it had held together at all. A mere push from the outside would have burst it open.

But I had no time to think about past dangers. I clutched the edge of the woodwork and after a struggle

that lasted for nearly five minutes succeeded in scrambling on to the floor of the foc's'le. I leaned over the edge of the shaft and listened. The noise had ceased.

I had no clear idea of what to do next. I only knew that I must escape from the hulk. Min-Shan might return at any moment, and I should be caught like a wounded rat in a trap. I had no weapon, and was too weak to stand on my feet. I should be absolutely at his mercy.

With considerable difficulty I crawled out of a gap in the side of the barge and tumbled headlong on to a soft bed of glass-wort. Then I crept along under the shadow of the barge and made my way to the side of the bank which lay in darkness. The moon shone feebly through a halo of mist, but I could see for a considerable distance along the bank. No help was in sight.

I kept moving, for the night air was cold, and I wished to get as far away from the old hulk as I could possibly manage to crawl. I kept to the bank because I knew that the men must come along it from Standinghoe.

But my progress was painfully slow. At times I crawled on my hands and knees; at others I could not even manage so much as this, and I had to drag myself along like a rabbit with a broken back.

Once or twice I rose to my feet and tried to walk, but the pain in my leg caused me such intense agony that I could not move more than two or three paces. I remembered that I owed this, at any rate, to Playle. His heavy boot had caught me close to the knee-cap.

He should pay for it with his life. Now that my fear

had vanished, the lust of blood seized me once more in its grip, and I knew that I could never be at rest till I had killed this man.

I crawled along for half an hour, and still there was no sign of any one coming to my assistance. I began to wonder if Playle had met with an accident and had failed to reach Standinghoe, or whether he had purposely left me to the mercy of Min-Shan. He must have known well enough that the hatchway would not hold for a minute.

Then, as I was passing between the foot of the bank and a thick bed of tall reeds that skirted the edge of a pool, a hand gripped me by the ankle.

I screamed aloud with terror and clutched at the grass of the bank, as I felt myself being drawn backwards into the bed of reeds. My fingers ripped long furrows in the earth, but I was dragged along with irresistible force. Then another hand clutched me by the throat and choked me into silence.

"If you are not quiet," said a voice, which I recognized as that of Min-Shan, "I will kill you. If you are quiet and do what I tell you, I will let you go free."

I ceased my struggles and lay perfectly still in his hands. He pulled me still further into the rushes, and then let go of me. One of my fingers was in the water of the pool.

"You understand what I said to you?" he continued.

"I understand," I replied, with a gasp for breath.

"If you cry out or call for help," he went on, "I shall take your head and thrust it down into the mud and

water of this pool till you are dead. Now that I have made things clear to you, I will take back what you have stolen from me."

He thrust his hand into my pocket and took out the sacred sphere of metal. I gripped his wrist and opened my mouth to cry out.

"Remember," he said quietly. I let go of his hand and gave a moan of pain.

"Give it back to me," I whispered hoarsely. "For pity's sake. I cannot live without it. You know I cannot live without it."

"I intend to give it back to you," he replied, "and to give you your life as well. But you must pay a price for it. I have work for you to do, and it must be done before morning."

"I will do whatever you wish," I said fervently. "I swear it." I meant what I said. There was nothing in the whole world that I would not have done at that moment to regain possession of the globe.

"The man Playle must die before morning," he continued. "I do not require vengeance for myself, though I barely escaped from him with my life, but for Ka-yu-ka. He has slain her and must die before the day breaks. Kiao Lung himself will destroy me if her death is unavenged. If you will kill Playle, I will give you both your life and the desire of your heart."

I laughed softly to myself. There was no need to tell him that I required no bribe to do the thing he asked. I was silent, as though I could not make up my mind to agree to his terms.

"Well," he said quietly, "is it to be that—or death?"

"I am helpless," I replied. "I cannot even walk to Standinghoe. The pain in my leg is terrible."

"Where?" he asked. I placed my finger on the spot just below the knee. He ripped the cloth of my trousers and felt the bones and muscles with the skill of a surgeon. Then he drew a tiny jar of ointment out of a leather pouch which hung from his waist and rubbed a little of it on the injured part. The pain grew less acute, and I gave a sigh of relief.

"In a few minutes," he said, "the pain will have vanished. We have some skill in medicine. Men say that we bear charmed lives, but our recovery from almost mortal wounds is only due to our knowledge of how to combat death."

"I am grateful to you," I said earnestly.

"Now with regard to Playle," he said. "The task before you is a glorious one. Of your own free will you have already become the servant of Kiao Lung. It is given to you to strike a blow for the honor of your master."

"Why should I deprive you of the glory?" I asked.

"Because after what has happened, I shall have to wait long for an opportunity. You can strike to-night. You will enter the house as a friend ——"

"And leave it for the gallows, I suppose. I do not think my gold will profit me much under those circumstances."

"You speak as a fool," he replied. "Take these," and

he slipped into my hand a couple of small pellets no larger than ordinary buckshot. "One of them is enough to kill. The poison leaves no trace behind, but it is certain death. They dissolve almost instantly in any liquid, and they are tasteless."

"Do they kill at once?" I said, as I placed them carefully in my waistcoat pocket.

"In a few minutes," he replied, "but the victim prays for death before a few seconds have elapsed."

I shuddered. Torture formed no part of my revenge, yet it seemed an essential feature of murder in the East. I could not, however, afford to neglect so perfect an instrument of death. I rose to my feet, and found, to my surprise, that I had recovered the use of my leg.

Then I peered out through the tall reeds, and looking towards Standinghoe saw three dim figures coming out of the mist on the top of the bank.

"They come for me, Min-Shan," I said. "Shall I hide and let them pass by?"

"No," he replied; "creep out on to the bank and let them find you. Let them carry you back to Standinghoe. They will take you to Playle's house. If they think of taking you on to your home, cry out that you cannot bear the pain. In this way you will enter Playle's house without suspicion. And here, take this, a pinch of this powder, in your finger and thumb." He held out a small box, and I obeyed his instructions.

"You need strength for your task," he said. "I know that your will is good, but that your bodily strength is almost exhausted. This will put life into you."

"You seem to have many medicines," I said with a laugh, and I raised my finger and thumb to my lips, but it was the finger and thumb of the other hand, and in the darkness Min-Shan did not detect the difference. The powder lay on the ground among the rushes. I had no desire for the Chinaman's drugs.

"How does it taste?" he asked. I was nonplussed, but hazarded a guess.

"Bitter," I replied.

"Yes," he answered, "it is bitter—very bitter. Here is the globe you value so highly."

I took it from his hand and placed it in my pocket.

"You trust me?" I queried in surprise.

"Yes," he answered; "I trust you, for, if you play me false, you cannot escape me. And, if Playle is not dead by daybreak, you die. You had better go now. I hear the voices of your friends."

I crawled out of the reeds into the dark shadow beneath the bank and lay there as though I had fallen down. As the men passed, I cried out. I explained that I had been afraid to remain where Playle had left me, but had found myself too weak to move another yard. Everything turned out precisely as Min-Shan had prophesied. I moaned with pain all the way, and, when they reached Standinghoe, I besought them to take me to Playle's house. Lights were still burning in the upper windows, and they knocked at the door.

Playle himself opened the door to us and told the men to bring me in and place me in an armchair by the fire.

He gave them each a quart mug of beer, and I told them to call on me the next day at Trunions, when I would reward them for their trouble. They drank the beer and left. I was alone with the man I had come to kill.

CHAPTER XXX

THE LIVING GOD

THE footsteps and voices of the men died away and there was silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the ticking of an old grandfather's clock in the corner.

Then Playle went to a cupboard and returned with a bottle of rum and two glasses, which he placed on the table.

"A drop of hot grog won't do either of us any harm, I'm thinking," he said gruffly, and taking the kettle from the hob, he planted it in the dancing flames.

"Nor a bit of food, either," he continued, and dragging himself slowly across the floor, he disappeared in the next room. I noticed the weariness of his limbs and the haggard expression of his bruised and battered face. He, too, had been through the mill. His enormous strength had saved the lives of myself and Mary Playle, but he had taxed it to the uttermost.

He reappeared with some bread and cold meat and cheese, and we both ate heartily. We neither of us spoke till we had finished. I was the first to break the silence.

"Mary," I said huskily; "how is she?"

"We've had the doctor in to her," he replied. "No bones are broken. It is nothing but fright; shock to the nerves, he calls it. She wants rest. He reckons she

will be all right in a day or two. But she's got to go away for a change."

The kettle began to sing. Playle rose to his feet, poured out two stiff measures of rum, and filled the glasses up with boiling water. I watched him with glittering eyes. The words of Min-Shan were ringing in my ears. "They dissolve almost instantly in any liquid, and are tasteless." I slipped one finger into my waistcoat pocket and touched the two small pellets.

"There is a word I would like to have with you," he said, as he seated himself by the fire and filled his pipe. "It's been in my mind for the last two hours, and I'm glad you've come in to-night to hear it. That leg of yours, it's bad, ain't it?"

"It is better now," I replied, still fingering the small round thing in my pocket.

"Well, you've to thank me for that leg," he continued sullenly, "and I've to ask your pardon for my hastiness. It was a coward's blow, it was, at the best. And now that I know the truth, it hurts me to think of it. Mary's told me the truth. It seems she was too paralyzed to move, but that she heard everything. You've acted ill by her, Sir Harry, but you behaved like a man at the last. And I'd like to shake your hand to-night and hear you say that you bear me no ill will."

I raised my glass to my lips with a trembling hand. But I could not swallow the hot liquid. My tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and I felt as though I were choking. I could not answer him.

"I know I've acted quick like," he continued, "but it

was for pity of my gal. Any man would have acted the same. Yet I should have remembered that you were not your own master, so to speak. The madness was on you. You were not yourself. Perhaps all may yet be well between you and Mary, but in any case here's my hand, and if you'll take it, I'll be glad." He stretched out his huge hand, and there was a red glow of shame on his scarred and hideous face.

"Not yet, Playle," I muttered, "not yet. I must think. So much has happened. I must think."

He withdrew his hand, and picking up his glass, drained it to the last drop. Then he stared at the fire and smoked in sullen silence.

I, too, looked at the fire, and it danced before my eyes in flames of blood. The man's overtures had not weakened my purpose, they had only made it more hideous. I placed one hand in my pocket and fingered the metal globe lovingly. After all, what was a man's life to the possession of so glorious a treasure as this. Besides, my own life hung in the balance. Min-Shan's words echoed in my brain. "If Playle is not dead by daybreak, you die." There was no escape, no alternative. Even love for the man would have made no difference to my purpose. And I still hated him; the lust of blood was still in my heart, and I longed to see him dead at my feet. I looked at the clock. It was half-past twelve. Playle was doomed to die before daylight. The sooner it was over the better. Yet I felt but a weak vessel of wrath, and began to regret that I had not taken the powder Min-Shan had offered me. I was a fool to have sus-

pected poison. He would not break the tool that lay so ready to his hand.

"We will have some more grog," said Playle after a long silence, "and then we will go to bed. Perhaps in the morning you will think better of me, Sir Harry."

He refilled the glasses, and as he turned his back to replace the kettle on the hob, I dropped one of the tiny pellets in his tumbler. It fizzed for a second and vanished from sight in the brown steaming liquid.

"Here's to Mary," he said, raising the glass in his great hand, "and God bless her." I was silent, and he looked at me, almost, as I fancied, with pleading eyes.

"You'll drink to Mary," he said hoarsely. "You bear the lass no ill will, do you, Sir Harry?"

I rose slowly to my feet, as though dragged from my seat by some unseen hand, and raised my glass.

"To Mary," I said slowly. "God—bless—her."

Then in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, the veil of my madness was rent in twain, and I saw the full horror of my deed. I saw Playle, not dead, but writhing in excruciating agony. I saw Mary Playle's white face at the doorway. I saw the whole terrible scene, and beyond it all I saw a young girl standing in the darkness—alone in the world.

With a terrible cry of pain I lurched forward against Playle with such violence that I dashed the glass and its contents from his very lips. Some of the liquid fell on my hand, and shrieking with agony, I should have fallen to the ground if Playle had not caught me in his powerful grasp.

"Sir Harry!" he cried. "Sir Harry! What is it?"

I broke away from his grip, and rushing to the door, opened it and fled out into the night.

He lumbered after me, calling out my name, but I soon outdistanced him. A terrible fear had seized me, a fear of the wrath of Kiao Lung. I dashed blindly through the darkness and fancied that some one was running swiftly behind me. I felt that even the night could not hide me, and that no human power could protect me. Hands seemed to clutch at my clothes as I passed; voices whispered in my ears. I did not know what lay before me or whither I was running. I only knew what was behind me, and I ran with all my strength, panting for breath, straining every nerve to escape.

Then something dark loomed up before me, and I came crashing into the arms of a gigantic man.

"Save me," I shrieked. "Save me!"

"You are safe," was the quiet reply, and I knew that it was Min-Shan who held me in his muscular grasp. I stood perfectly still, frozen with terror.

Then the moon came out from behind a cloud, and I saw that I was close to a little mound about fifty feet high. Its base was covered with bushes, and it was crowned with a small ugly church. The tiny wooden spire stood out against the sky, and a few tombstones, rising out of a bed of long and luxuriant grass, glimmered in the moonlight. There are a hundred such churches in Essex, but I knew that this belonged to the parish of Little Standinghoe, a small group of cottages situated more than a mile from their place of worship.

A service was only held there once a month, and the building was rapidly falling to decay.

I looked at the little House of God with pleading eyes. To some men it might have stood out as a place of refuge, a sanctuary that neither man nor devil would dare to desecrate. But to me it was an inaccessible fortress. I had worshiped there in my youth. But now God had cast me out and barred the doors.

"You are safe," repeated Min-Shan. "You must have been careless. How did they discover you?" I did not answer him. He thought that my crime had been found out, and that I was flying from justice.

"Well, it does not matter," he continued. "You will cheat the gallows yet. That powder I gave you was a slow poison. In twenty-four hours you will be dead."

Still I did not answer, but slowly and surely there came into my mind the idea that some guardian angel must have been with me during the past few hours. My silence aroused Min-Shan's suspicions, and he swung me round so that the moonlight fell upon my face.

"You have not done it," he said, looking steadily into my eyes. "Well, there is still time. You shall go back and do it now before the dawn."

I laughed derisively. "It is a pity you spoke so soon," I jeered. "No threats can compel a dying man; no promises can tempt him."

"I lied," he answered quietly; "the powder was harmless."

"It is of no importance," I said with a laugh. "I did not take it."

"You must go back," he continued firmly. "Think of what you are giving up. Has the desire for gold passed from you?"

"It has," I replied quietly, but for all that I knew that it had not, and with the proximity of this man, it once more began to rise uppermost in my mind, and grip my heart and soul. I clutched the globe with one of my hands and resolved that no one should take it from me. Then he began to reason with me in a gentle voice and to portray such visions of splendid wealth and power that my brief spell of sanity vanished in a golden cloud.

"I will go," I muttered, and turned my face to Standinghoe. He loosed my arm and smiled. Then something prompted me to look back, and I saw the spire of the tiny church pointing upwards like the finger of God.

Something seemed to snap within my brain. The fear of Kiao Lung once more overwhelmed me. I stretched out my hands towards the church, reeled a step forward, and then ran for my life towards the low wall of the churchyard.

I cleared it with a single bound, and staggered up through the long grass and the tombstones to the rickety door. Min-Shan was close behind me, and I knew that this time there would be no mercy.

I flung myself against the rotten woodwork, and it went splintering from the hinges. Then I tore madly up the aisle to the very steps of the altar.

A broad shaft of moonlight fell upon the little communion-table, and turned its faded crimson cloth to a

sheet of blood. I sank on my knees before it and prayed :

"Oh, God," I cried aloud, "deliver me from evil."

My voice echoed through the empty church, and a mocking laugh answered my prayer. I looked back and saw Min-Shan's tall figure standing in the doorway. Then I heard his steps clanking slowly up the stone aisle. He had me as a rat in a trap.

"Oh, God," I cried again, "deliver me, and I will serve Thee all my days."

Again Min-Shan laughed. He was standing at the altar rails. I sank to the ground and clutched the crimson cloth.

"Have mercy, O God!" I prayed; "have mercy."

"Cry rather to Kiao Lung for mercy," Min-Shan replied, "or to me, his servant. Your God will not answer you. If He is near, let Him speak."

He stepped softly over the rails, and his tall figure towered up in the shaft of moonlight. He stretched out his hand towards me, and then suddenly stopped, as though he had been turned to stone. His eyes were fixed on something that I could not see, and his broad face was convulsed with horror.

Then, without a cry or a word, he flung up his arms, as if in supplication, and crashed to the ground, breaking down the altar rails as he fell. I crept to his side and saw that he was dead.

The Living God had spoken !

CHAPTER XXXI

MY KINGDOM

EIGHT weeks after the death of Min-Shan, I sat in the study at Trunions before a roaring fire. I was white-faced, and weak and trembling as a child. For it was my first day down-stairs after an attack of brain fever, which nearly cost me my life.

They had found me senseless by the altar of Little Standinghoe Church, and for a fortnight my life hung in a balance, which the weight of a single hair would have turned against me. But God had been merciful to me, a sinner; aye, and would have been merciful even if I had died, for the madness had passed from my soul; and the curse of Kiao Lung was broken.

There was a knock at the door, and Billy Playle was shown into the room. He came to my side and held out his hand. I took it in my thin, white fingers and smiled.

"Sit down, Playle," I said sadly. "So she has refused to come. Well, I cannot blame her. You told her everything?"

"I told her everything," he replied, "and she has come, she has."

"Where is she?" I cried, sitting up straight in my

chair. "I must see her at once. Bring her to me at once."

"Steady, Sir Harry; steady," he said, as I sank back on my pillows, white and exhausted. "She is in the hall, by the fire. I thought I'd have a word or two with you first. The doctor is out there with her."

"Dr. Joyce?" I asked.

"Aye, Dr. Joyce," he replied significantly, and I knew what his words implied.

"I have done what you told me to do, Sir Harry," he continued.

"Does it lie deep?" I asked.

"Aye, in twenty fathoms of water—seven miles out from the edge of the Sunken Sands. No mortal hand will ever touch it again."

"Twenty fathoms of water?" I queried mechanically. "That is deep, indeed, Playle. I am grateful to you."

"And you ain't wishing to have it back again?" he asked.

I smiled wearily.

"Does a drowning man wish to be thrown back into the sea?" I said. "But Mary—bring her to me. I would like to see her alone. I cannot wait. I have not seen her since—since that night."

He rose to his feet.

"Forget that night, Sir Harry," he said gravely. "I will send her to you; but it must be a short interview; Dr. Joyce says ——"

"Send her to me," I cried.

He left the room, and in less than a minute Mary

Playle entered. Her face was white, but there was a glad smile on her lips. She closed the door behind her and came to my side. I held out my hand, and she took it shyly.

"Mary," I said hoarsely, "I have done you a great wrong—the foulest wrong a man could do to the woman he loves. I was too great a coward to tell you with my own lips. But you know all?"

"I know all," she answered softly.

"You know that I invented a despicable lie to gratify my own vanity and lust of power? You know that I attempted your uncle's life?"

"I know all," she repeated, and, sitting down on a footstool by the fire, she looked earnestly into my face.

"And knowing all, can you forgive me?" I continued. "I cannot hope for your love, but I ask for your forgiveness."

"I forgive you," she answered, looking away from me at the fire. There was silence, broken only by the sound of the wind outside the building and the cheerful crackle of the flames. Then I thought I heard another sound—the faint sobbing of a woman.

"Mary," I said softly.

She did not answer. I leaned forward and placed my hand upon her head.

"Mary," I said again in a whisper. "My dearest."

She raised her tear-stained face to mine. I bent over her, and kissed her reverently on the forehead.

"Will you marry me," I asked in a broken voice, "in spite of all?"



“I forgive you,” she answered, looking away from me at the fire.

For reply she flung her arms round my neck, and our lips met in a passionate kiss.

* * * * *

"It was the madness, Harry," she said a few minutes afterwards, as I still harped on the cruel trick I had played her. "It was not you, dearest, but the madness—the curse of Kiao Lung."

"I do not excuse myself," I answered. "I can only thank God for His mercy. I tried to fight it alone. But it was only by His strength that I was saved."

"But the gold?" she asked in a frightened voice. "What will you do with it? How can you get rid of it? Will you cast it into the sea?"

I smiled grimly and produced the draft of a letter I intended writing to the Duke of Bragues. It expressed my willingness to fulfil my promise with regard to the Styrian Loan, but regretted my inability to carry out the rest of my bargain.

"That amount at any rate," I said cheerfully, "is as good as cast into the sea. The interest on Styrian bonds is certain—it is invariably nil. As for the rest of the gold, I propose to use it for some purpose that will benefit my fellow men. But we will talk over the schemes some other day. My heart is too full of joy to think about money to-day."

"You are quite sure you will not regret the loss of your wealth?" she asked wistfully.

"Quite sure, dear heart," I replied.

"Not even the loss of a kingdom?" she asked.

I took her in my arms and held her very close to me.

"My kingdom," I whispered, "is here, and has been given me by the grace of a merciful God."

THE END



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